

**Blood, Sweat and Cheers: Absurdist Crime Films and Contemporary Society**

**Christopher Meisner**

**Interdisciplinary MA in Popular Culture**

**Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of**

**Master of Arts in Popular Culture**

**Faculty of Social Sciences, Brock University  
St. Catharines, Ontario**

**© October 2011**

## **ABSTRACT**

Within the crime film tradition there is a plethora of sub-genres all of which relate to crime and its consequences. However, directors Joel and Ethan Coen, Quentin Tarantino and David Lynch, all of whom create plots around crime and criminality, have been difficult to pin down and attribute to any given sub-genre. This thesis demonstrates that an absurdist philosophy can be used to effectively examine the content of the previously mentioned filmmakers. Through an analysis of these filmmakers and their better known works compelling evidence is revealed suggesting that these filmmakers may all belong to the emerging crime film sub-genre known as absurdist crime films.

— CONTENTS —

— Introduction — 1

*Absurdity and The Theatre 1*

*Defining the “Crime Film” 8*

*The Emergence of a New Tradition 9*

*Absurdist Crime Films 12*

— Chapter 1: The Coen Brothers — 19

*The Coens and Genre 20*

*Dark Humour 27*

*Concluding the Coens 33*

— Chapter 2: Quentin Tarantino — 36

*Real Violence 38*

*Dark Humour 42*

*Tarantino And His Own Tradition 46*

*Hard-Boiled Dialogue 50*

*Concluding Tarantino 54*

— Chapter 3: David Lynch — 57

*The Literature of Dream and Fantasy 58*

*The Dream 60*

*Wakening 63*

*Lynchian Reality 65*

*Pure Theatre 70*

*Concluding David Lynch 73*

— Conclusion — 77

— Filmography — 84

— Bibliography — 86

## — INTRODUCTION —

Before delving into the meat and potatoes of the following research it is first important to take the time to both understand the origins of the topic of absurdist crime film and to situate it within a broader context of genre and philosophy. Addressing the directions and limitations of the literature relevant to the topic of absurdist film will do just that. Perhaps the most effective way to explore the literature of such a topic is to begin with a division of the term “absurdist crime film” into its respective parts “absurdity” and “crime film.” After deconstructing the term one can approach an initial understanding of both the use of the concept of absurdism as well as a historical view on the formation of the sub-genre of film. However, it is impossible to adequately define absurdity within the context of popular culture without first examining its history.

### *ABSURDITY AND THE THEATRE*

In simplest terms, absurdity can be defined as “out of harmony” or “ridiculous” (Esslin, 1968, p. 23). However, for the purposes of this thesis we must forge on in search of a more narrowed and concrete explanation related to popular culture and in order to do so those who have attempted to see absurdity in a similar light must be considered. The subject bearing closest resemblance to the topic of film is theatre. The literature pertaining to the area of absurdist drama and theatre demonstrates a hodgepodge of a variety of different understandings and approaches to the definition, examination, classification, and understanding of what Martin Esslin famously termed in the first edition of his book from which it gets its title, “the Theatre of the Absurd” (1961). This presents an early roadblock that needs to be addressed in order to find a working

definition of absurdist film. Academics and critics alike have focused on the Theatre of the Absurd through many different analytical modes. Some have chosen to recognize the Theatre of the Absurd as a period category (Carlson, 1984), others as a school of thought or movement (Esslin, 1961; 1968) and still others as carrying philosophical implications (Brater and Cohn, 1990; Cohn, 1969).

Perhaps the most logical place to begin an overview is with the original use of the term by Esslin. According to Esslin a collection of plays including the works of Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, and few others could be linked together through their sharing of one broad theme, the “metaphysical anguish” over the absurdity of the human condition. While this theme is significant for Esslin’s understanding of The Theatre of the Absurd it is borrowed from none other than Ionesco who initially identified the absurd as that which is without purpose, senseless, and useless (Esslin, 1961, p. 5). Regardless, Esslin was the first to use the term absurd as a means to categorize the theatre in the first edition of his book. Esslin’s approach to the Theatre of the Absurd has remained quite popular and his method for defining the Theatre of the Absurd based on his technical criteria is praised and referred to by many (see Brater and Cohn, 1990; Conceison, 2004; Zarhy-Levo, 2001). Yet Ruby Cohn postulates that the Theatre of the Absurd did not begin with Esslin’s conceptualization but rather that it originated closer to mid-century in 1950 shortly after World War II (1990, p. 1). Like Esslin, Cohn had begun to notice the growing trend of dark humor and the absurdity of the human condition within the theatre but it was Esslin’s technical categories that conceptualized the Theatre of the Absurd.

As stated earlier Esslin's work recognizes the Theatre of the Absurd as a movement, but of equal importance is his strict focus on the style and craftsmanship of his collection of playwrights. For Esslin, it is these characteristics that define the Theatre of the Absurd. Esslin's stylistic understanding of the Theatre of the Absurd is broken down into four specific headings: "pure theatre", "clowning", "verbal nonsense", and "the literature of dream and fantasy."

The first of Esslin's headings, *pure theatre*, refers to that which is unspoken or anti-literary. It is pure in the sense that true theatre is outside the realm of language, and can only become evident through performance. Consequently pure theatre, and the anti-literary, gain deeper levels of metaphysical meaning as they express more than language is capable of (1961, p. 282). The second of Esslin's categories, *clowning*, has been traced back through the tradition of the *mimus* and Shakespeare's portrayal of clowns as well as the many foolish characters of the silent film era. The *mimus* refers to a form of popular theatre that coexisted alongside classical tragedy and comedy genres (p. 284). The *mimus* contained singing, dancing, and juggling but more importantly these actions were based broadly on the realistic representations of character types in spontaneous and often improvised clowning (p. 284). Clowning is significant to the absurdity of drama, because it is through clowning and clownish characters that serious, horrifying occurrences become fused with the humorous. Thirdly, Esslin refers to *verbal nonsense* as a telling characteristic of the Theatre of the Absurd. Through verbal nonsense the author is capable of playing with the boundaries of logic and language. The stringing together of words not bothering with their meanings or logical order allows absurdist playwrights the opportunity to, as Esslin states, abandon the "straightjacket of logic" which provides a

sort of liberation from seriousness (p. 293). Lastly, for Esslin it is through the *literature of dream and fantasy* that absurdity can become apparent. The absurdity does not lie simply in the representation of mythical dreamlike thought but rather it lies in the projection of mythical, allegorical, and dreamlike thought into psychological realities (p. 301). Although Esslin's headings are all equally important, he notes that they often overlap as well as become displayed in varying degrees throughout the Theatre of the Absurd.

Rather than relying on primary stylistic characteristics like Esslin, Carlson (1984) approaches the Theatre of the Absurd as specific to a particular theatre era. Carlson neatly situates the Theatre of the Absurd into a time period with the genre's birth in 1950 (in agreement with Cohn, 1990), and the decline of the genre at around 1965. When considering Carlson and Esslin's descriptions of the Theatre of the Absurd some congruities can be observed. While Carlson refrains from relying on specific categories of style, he similarly refers to aspects of 'pure drama' where theatre can be freed from explanations, logic and psychological motivation and exist liberated from all external distractions. Once free from what Carlson refers to as the 'social crust' the theatre is able to address the anguish, desires, myths and dreams of man (1984, p. 412).

Although there remain some similarities between Esslin and Carlson's account of the Theatre of the Absurd more significance rests upon where they disagree. In order to illustrate the Theatre of the Absurd Carlson relies on a similar selection of playwrights, but he excludes Jean Genet due to his differing philosophical outlook. Carlson contends that based on technique and style alone Genet is parallel to Beckett, Ionesco and Adamov, but when a closer look is taken at the philosophical overtones of Genet's work

one can identify a fascination with domination and submission or patterns of sadomasochism rather than the meaningless view of the human condition and the breakdown of language that unites Beckett, Ionesco and Adamov. The inconsistency between Esslin and Carlson's list of absurdist playwrights is crucial to the problem of defining the Theatre of the Absurd. Not only does it address the problem with attempting to define the Theatre of the Absurd only through style and craftsmanship, the inconsistency also points out how similar approaches to evaluating absurdist drama can rely on very different definitions.

The plethora of methods employed to define absurdity has resulted in what William Oliver (1963) calls the "critical Babel" (p.224). Oliver's critical Babel is a direct result of many attempts to define absurdist through craftsmanship. Oliver's critique of previous absurdist theories stresses the importance of subject matter over style. He argues that the style of absurdist drama will constantly be changing but the content will stay relatively the same. Therefore, as absurd as it might sound, one can only define the Theatre of the Absurd based on its subject: absurdity. Accepting absurdity as a philosophy rather than a concept or state of being will form an instantaneous bond between all types of writers and only then can comparisons be readily made between all regardless of technique or style (p. 225-226). No longer are absurdist recognized for their use of age-old techniques of the theatre; they can be recognized simply for the philosophical theme of absurdity.

Oliver (1965), like those before him, defines absurdism as the "inescapable assessment of the human condition" (p. 196), but for Oliver "assessment" represents a philosophical outlook on the human condition, a condition that is always absurd. This is



the position where absurdism originates, from within a 'senseless', 'useless' vantage point on the human existence (Esslin, 1961, p. 6). From this vantage point absurdity is more of an inescapable part of life than a scholarly concern. To absurdists, our entire existence is absurd. Not only is the human condition between birth and death subject to absurdity, absurdist thinking suggests that both acts of birth and death are in themselves absurd because they take place without asking (Oliver, 1963, p. 225). Therefore, an absurdist philosophy suggests that human existence has been and always will be absurd.

In the aftermath of such traumatic events as the Holocaust and the Hiroshima bombing western society saw a decline of religious faith as well as faith in humanity, and many saw little reason or meaning in life, perhaps facilitating the rise of absurdism. Many playwrights, like those previously mentioned, began to adopt an absurdist philosophy, situating themselves within an absurdist style of theatre, the Theatre of the Absurd (Esslin, 1968; Grossvogel, 1962). Therefore, the Theatre of the Absurd can be understood as a collection of plays and playwrights who hold a similar philosophical outlook on life. To return again to Esslin (1961), absurdist playwrights all understand and view the human condition as "senseless" and "meaningless" (p. 6). However, portraying such a radical and unpopular view of life plainly within their productions would likely result in the quick dismissal of their work. In order to attempt to awaken the audience to the absurdity of life or simply depict it, absurdists must pretend they are giving their audience something else. What results is a category of theatre that embeds messages of absurdity within, disguising them through irony and allegorical and expressionistic symbols. Absurdity must be masked with amusing, sensational, and

surprising plots, for the audience to (as put by Oliver) “swallow the comedy-coated pill of absurdity” (Oliver, 1963, p. 229).

To reiterate thus far, the Theatre of the Absurd has been defined through a particular style or craftsmanship, through an era in theatre history, and lastly as a philosophical outlook on life. After reviewing the literature the initial approach of Esslin and the approach of Carlson are more easily discarded for their shortcomings. While confining the Theatre of the Absurd to a specific era in history ignores the timelessness of absurdity, defining the Theatre of the Absurd through craftsmanship ignores craftsmanship’s ability to change over time. It appears that a philosophical approach to the Theatre of the Absurd is the most suitable for addressing the shortcomings of the previous approaches, as well as illustrating and defining this genre of theatre.

Although the literature on the concept and philosophy of absurdity usually refers to the theatre, it is no stranger to other modes of entertainment and expression. The African avant-garde writer, Taban Lo Liyong, has been classified as an absurdist based on his works of oral and written literature (Balogun, 1984), as has the Italian short story writer and playwright, Vrigilio Pinera (Gilgen, 1980). However, only recently has the absurdist philosophy made its way into popular film (Rafter, 2000; 2006). In the second edition of her book *Shots in the Mirror*, Nicole Rafter (2006) discusses the relationship between crime films and society. While Rafter briefly touches on the emergence of the absurdist crime film, she neglects to provide a sound definition of what constitutes an 'absurd' crime film. To date, the absurdist crime film remains undefined and untouched within the study of popular culture.

### ***DEFINING THE “CRIME FILM”***

Although they have existed for more than a century, crime films have been surprisingly difficult to define. Rafter (2006) suggests that the difficulty rests in the overwhelming number of crime films available. Although many films may incorporate crime as a part of their plot, Rafter argues that this does not necessarily make them “crime films.” From a historical perspective, definitions of crime films have ranged from the very narrow, limited to only a specific type of crime, to the extremely broad, including all films that portray crime. Regardless, defining the crime film has been very problematic and perhaps this can be attributed to the use of genre.

The term “genre” is widely used within popular culture and especially with regards to the study of film. When one thinks about genre one tends to think in terms of “types” and “kinds,” which are both naturally derived from the French meaning of the word (Neale, 2002, p. 9). Furthermore, film genres represent a group of films that share similar subjects and themes (Gehring, 1988). Robert Warshow (1948) and Carlos Clarens (1980) have attempted to solve the problem of defining crime films through the use of genre. Warshow (1948) examined the early gangster film and defined gangster films specifically as crime films, skewing the definition of crime films by limiting them to one specific genre (Leitch, 2002). Clarens (1980) initially identifies this problem in a critique of Warshow, but when redefining the crime film he specifically excludes the psychological thriller, again limiting the definition and leaving out crucial crime films like Alfred Hitchcock’s *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) and *Rear Window* (1954). Yet both Clarens and Warshow’s definitions are limited and exclusive, as they both neglect to identify crime films as a body of films that may be composed of many different sub-

genres.

Larry Langman and Daniel Finn (1995), as well as Thomas Leitch (2002), came to the realization that crime films are not genre specific. They suggested that crime films can be classified more adequately as dramas or even as an umbrella term, under which films of many sub-genres may fall. Stated more precisely by Rafter (2006), crime films are “films that focus primarily on crime and its consequences” (p. 6). This definition suggests that crime films encompass a great variety of sub-genres and even overlapping sub-genres, some of which have been categorized by Rafter as cop films, courtroom dramas, police and detective films, and also more abstract categories such as films of moral ambiguity, critical crime films and environmental crime films. Traditionally, crime films have existed to critique and explore many aspects of criminality and society while providing the audience the opportunity for satisfaction in the triumph of justice and good over evil. Nonetheless contemporary cinema has given life to alternative practices within the compass of crime films.

### ***THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW TRADITION***

In her discussion of the changing face of Hollywood, Yvonne Tasker (1996) suggests that the fall of the studio system in the postwar period and shifts in cinematic style have led to a transformation of “classic Hollywood” into what she refers to as “new” or “post-classic Hollywood.” The stylistic changes in film during the 1970s have been credited to new and emerging technologies. Tasker names a few technologies important to the emergence of a new Hollywood: freeze frame, split screen, zoom lenses and Steadicam (p. 221). However, one can ask whether these new film techniques were readily incorporated into classic Hollywood or rather that their development and

inclusion marked a departure from the 'classic Hollywood' style. Perhaps this question can be best answered by Steve Neale (1976):

The use of devices such as the zoom and telephoto lenses, slow-motion and split-screen have destroyed the dramatic and spatio-temporal unity that founded classical mise-en-scene with its economy, density and 'subtlety' of signification; plot linearity and its corollary, the goal-oriented hero, have been replaced by narrative fragmentation and troubled, introspective protagonists; genre conventions have to a large extent broken down, to be replaced by a realism compromised by traditional dramatic values and the exigencies of narrative conventions or a use of older generic conventions invested with an empty nostalgia or a knowing cynicism or both. (p. 117-118)

Neale's description of new Hollywood places a great deal of significance on the fall of the studio system. New Hollywood opened the door for independent filmmaking, which was central to the development of both alternative and absurdist crime films. Since the shift to new Hollywood the stylistic changes and the expansion of independent production are undeniable. Perhaps equally important to mention here is the effect that the questioning of generic conventions had on the Hollywood film industry. With the loss of secure generic traditions films are capable of becoming an amalgamation of all sorts of genres, and different genres can be called upon in any given film to incite the desired affect or response from the audience. The emergence of the blockbuster or what James Monaco refers to as "machines of entertainment" meant that the cinematic effect becomes more visceral and films focus primarily on exciting the audience rather than intriguing them (Schatz, 1993, p. 19).

On the other hand, during the same timeframe, new cinematic styles and the growth of independent filmmaking facilitated opportunities for auteurism. While the blockbuster marked the origins of a new Hollywood, so did the emergence of American Art cinema (Staiger, 1992). Modeled after European Art cinema, American Art cinema

gave rise to American author-directors who approach film as a means to express their artistic vision. Although one could question whether or not absurdist crime films are best categorized within the realm of Art Cinema, this growing sub-genre of film did originate within the New Hollywood era where the tradition of craftsmanship and mise-en-scène is replaced with individual technique and nostalgia.

What results in the New Hollywood era can be characterized as a postmodern pattern in film. A new rhetoric grounded in the characteristics of depthlessness and pastiche. Without depth, images are represented as blank surfaces free from historicity; what was once rendered ugly, obscure and immoral can be institutionalized within the fabric of a new cultural dominant (Jameson 1991, p. 18). Such explicit moments have lost their scandalizing affect and are often met with a great level of complacency. Similarly, the imitation of the peculiar and unique styles of the past previously practiced through comical mimicry or parody is replaced with pastiche, a form of blank parody, or parody without humor (Jameson, 1991).

Nicole Rafter (2006) discusses the postmodern trend in crime films and recognizes an emerging type of crime film that differentiates itself through its reliance on darkly humorous violence. Rafter termed this category of film as “absurdist,” referencing directors like Quentin Tarantino, the Coen Brothers and David Lynch, all of which have been examined in a variety of different and even conflicting ways (p. 52). Tarantino’s films have been categorized in ways ranging from horror films, as his plots have been recognized for their tendency to shock and scare, to gangster films, as many of his films follow hardened criminals, to heist films, as some of his plots are created around a specific heist (Briggs, 2003). The Coen brothers have been recognized for an all

encompassing mastery over genre as many have attempted to situate their films in a broad array of genres based on mostly on their appearance like film noir, comedy, the gangster film, satire or horror and many more (Levine, 2000). And lastly, David Lynch as been linked to a variety of genres most notably, Neo-noir (Denzin, 1988), gothic films/cult films (Simon, 1986), and even pornography (Williamson, 1986). While these directors have been examined individually in the past, this thesis proposes a new way to examine these directors collectively, not through stylistic means or visual qualities, as has been the case in the past, but through the philosophical theme of absurdity and how each director team and director approaches the absurd.

### ***ABSURDIST CRIME FILMS***

While Rafter can be commended for acknowledging the growing trend within contemporary crime film her focus remains outside the scope of setting it apart from its postmodern counterparts or examining its implications. Rafter also associates alternative tradition crime films with the postmodern movement. Alternative tradition crime films challenge traditional genres by failing to include any real heroes or plot resolution and instead subject the audience to the cruel realities of crime and criminality (Rafter, 2006). Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1963) follows a group of young Italian friends coming of age in Little Italy, New York. While there are no heroes in the film each character attempts to make his way by conforming to the criminal culture that he lives in. Once the film demonstrates the glorious benefits of crime such as money, fancy suits, respect, and power, *Mean Streets* reveals the real consequences of a criminal lifestyle as Johnny Boy, an aspiring street criminal, trying to advance in a criminal lifestyle by becoming a mobster, is gunned down in a high speed chase, and Charlie, the film's protagonist, and

his girlfriend barely escape death in the eventual car crash. While most films concentrate their plots around heroic ‘good guy’ protagonists, like John McClane (Bruce Willis) in the *Die Hard* series (McTiernan, 1988, 1995; Harlin, 1990; Wiseman, 2007) or Detective Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) in *Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 1991) alternative tradition crime films, such as *Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese, 1976), and *Mystic River* (Eastwood, 2003), subvert conventional crime film norms but generally project the message that crime does not pay, a message completely foreign to absurdist films.

Absurdist crime films may be more accurately classified on their own. By drawing on Rafter’s discussion of “alternative tradition crime films,” absurdist crime films can be recognized as films that evoke a “dream like state” through darkly humorous violence, which is arguably reminiscent of contemporary American society (Rafter, 2006, p. 52). While the emergence of alternative crime films demonstrates a new trend in crime films, the Coen brothers’ first film *Blood Simple* (1984) may have been the first to incorporate an absurdist philosophy, the philosophy that arguably sets these films apart. Julian Marty, suspicious of his wife’s infidelity, hires a private detective, Loren Visser, to kill her [Abby] and her lover [Ray]. Visser, on the other hand, has an alternative plan, going as far as faking photos that depict Abby and Ray murdered together in bed in order to collect his payment. Abby and Ray are ignorant of Visser’s existence, and a series of bizarre events that leaves Ray believing that Abby killed Marty gives *Blood Simple* an ironic and dark comedic edge which became a staple of both neo-noir and the absurdist crime sub-genre. Other directors such as David Lynch with *Blue Velvet* (1986), *Wild at Heart* (1990), and *Mulholland Dr.* (2001), and Quentin Tarantino with *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Jackie Brown* (1998) and the more radical *Death Proof*



(2007), have been recognized for similar portrayals of irony and dark comedy, elements that are essential to the examination of the absurd.

While the more conventional crime films all share the thematic triumph of good over evil, relying on “heroes, villains, and satisfying endings,” they challenge the status quo, only to reassure that justice prevails in the end (Rafter, 2006 p. 213). What makes absurdist crime films, like alternative tradition crime films, so interesting and distinctive is they challenge these norms, and more specifically they fly in the face of traditional genres, displaying the ‘real’ rather than the fabric of daily life. According to Slavoj Zizek (2000), the real constitutes the traumatic hidden sense of reality that cannot be integrated into the imaginary or the fabric of daily life (p. viii). Traumatic in nature, extreme violence has been identified as a major characteristic of the real, an element that has become emblematic of contemporary crime films. But what may separate the absurdist crime sub-genre from other crime films may be the portrayal of extreme exaggerations of irony and the unusual taste for comedic violence. In absurdist crime films, unlike conventional and alternative tradition crime films, the spectacle is not the pursuit of justice or the glamorous appeal of a criminal lifestyle, but rather lies in the films’ ironic, violent and humorous events.

An absurdist perspective hypothesizes that absurdity has always been a part of society. The acts of both birth and death are in themselves absurd, but little attention is drawn to the absurdity of life. Beckett, Adamov and Ionesco and others have shed light on the absurdity of society and life through theatre. Now there has been a new movement within popular film to demonstrate as well as critique the absurdity of contemporary society. Because this emerging sub-genre of film is still relatively new there is a need for

an academic examination of absurdist films. While many film directors are content with conforming to the conventional and alternative crime film traditions, directors Quentin Tarantino, David Lynch, and Joel and Ethan Coen set themselves apart by subverting crime film norms and providing a window through which one can examine and understand the absurdity of contemporary society. A critical examination of a selection of films from these three directors would be invaluable to a complete understanding of contemporary society.

There is now a sizable body of films that minimize consequences of crime while ironically representing crime and criminality with a great deal of vulgarity, brutality and sexual perversion. A relatively new crime film sub-genre has emerged out of the philosophical predicament that faces humanity, the meaning of life. Like the Theatre of the Absurd, the absurdist crime film sub-genre reflects the state of despair that follows the discovery that there is no meaning in human existence. Although the Coens, Tarantino and Lynch all create experiences remarkably different from one another, they all share the philosophical theme of absurdity. Surprisingly little attention has been granted to the prevailing theme of absurdity within film, a dumbfounding discovery as the absurdist philosophy is significant to the films of arguably the most influential directors of our time.

Like the Theatre of the Absurd, absurdist crime films are a representation of the real world. Absurdity is a fact of life and examining the subject matter of absurdist films can address some very real concerns depicted within the absurdly fictional world. Absurdist crime films, not unlike detective films, prison films, or courtroom dramas, represent a sub-genre of the crime film genre. And like those other sub-genres, absurdist

crime films are distinguishable based on specific iconography and themes. Absurdist crime films, according to the literature, could be expected to display scenes of dark humour and great irony while disguising the absurdity of the human condition through allegorical and expressionistic symbols. However, a more thorough analysis is needed in order to better capture the nature of this sub-genre.

The filmmakers examined within this thesis not only display characteristics alluded to by Esslin, but also represent some of the most enticing philosophical arguments in contemporary film. Through a critical analysis of Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994), the Coen brothers' *Blood Simple* (1984) and *Fargo* (1996), and Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986) and *Mulholland Dr.* (2001), this thesis will examine the many absurdist messages embedded in their films. Although these directors have produced many films relevant to the subject of study, for feasibility, two of the more well-known films by each director or director team will be examined in depth while their other relevant films may be drawn on more briefly. Following the guidelines of the auteur theory, which posits the director as the author of a film and therefore the "primary creative agent," this thesis will refer to the directors as absurdist (Allen & Lincoln, 2004, p. 871). The goal of this thesis will be to understand the directors' views, thoughts and feelings related to the absurdity of life. Focusing on these directors, or absurdist auteurs, will allow for a thorough comparative analysis of how they view the absurdity of society and life as well as the many ways absurdity is reflected in film from different perspectives.

Although Esslin's (1968) categories of craftsmanship may have been very well suited to the theatre, attempting to project the stylistic elements onto the more dominant

film industry is not so cut and dried. When assessing a group of playwrights, Esslin is able to trace their style back through a long and far reaching tradition of theatre craftsmanship, dating back at least as far as Shakespeare. On the other hand, when looking upon contemporary cinema, attempting to trace and understand the style of an auteur director can be very difficult, if not impossible, as these directors continually play with generic boundaries and cinematic traditions.

As noted earlier by Oliver (1963), the craftsmanship or style employed by absurdist may vary or change, but examining absurdist for their subject matter creates an instantaneous bond regardless of technique. The artistic styles of the Coens, Tarantino, and Lynch differ greatly but what ties them together is the underlying message of absurdity, that life is not just ridiculous but meaningless. Rather than being classified on the strengths of settings, emotions, or stock characters, absurdist crime films are most appropriately grouped for their philosophical implications. Nevertheless, throughout their films many elements contribute to the overall absurdist theme, and help to distinguish an absurdist crime film. Dark humour, violence and irony are all represented in varying degrees and assist in both concealing the messages of absurdity through aesthetic distraction and conveying them through philosophical suggestion. What may be of great significance to the emergence of this new sub-genre is the level of independence that the Coens, Tarantino and Lynch all maintain. These film directors, who may represent the majority of the few auteur filmmakers remaining in the industry, are all incorporating an absurdist philosophical approach to contemporary society in their films.

Now that a theoretical foundation has been laid it is time to dig into the growing trend of absurdity within the crime film sub-genre. Because theatre and the

contemporary films of the Coen brothers, Tarantino, and Lynch are separated by tradition and style, the categories of craftsmanship proposed by Esslin (1968) cannot be rigidly followed in the analytic process. However, where appropriate, drawing on aspects of Esslin's insight into the Theatre of the Absurd may be helpful for informing discussions around absurdist characteristics. Rather than focusing strictly on film style or philosophy an effort will be made to address absurdism in contemporary film by simply examining what makes each filmmakers' work absurd. Attention will now be shifted to the creative genius of the Coen brothers.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE COEN BROTHERS

In 1984 the premiere of *Blood Simple* marked the emergence of arguably the most influential independent contemporary filmmakers, Joel and Ethan Coen. Without substantial ties to the film industry and lacking sufficient funds to produce their artistic vision, Joel aligned himself with the Jewish charity Hadassah and procured a list of the hundred wealthiest Jewish benefactors in Minnesota. Joel then contacted them one by one, downplaying the importance of his own financial gain, until they had enough money invested to make their film. The Coens' sole purpose was to film their script and satisfy their investors' expectations. Joel ultimately earned the confidence of several investors, insisting that he and his brother Ethan would maintain complete control over the production of what would become *Blood Simple* (Palmer, 2004, p. 8). This arrangement proved to be the foundation for all their future endeavors as independent filmmakers. Joel and Ethan Coen have come to epitomize both perfect examples of independent filmmakers as well as auteurist artists. Since their Hollywood debut with *Blood Simple* the Coen brothers have written, directed and produced some of the most profoundly original works of popular cinema, yet their Hollywood success has not estranged them from their original stylistic tradition.

With the Coen brothers' recent Oscar success with *No Country For Old Men* (2007) they have received much attention from film critics, who have collectively failed to agree upon a genre that can capture the content of the Coens' most recent film. In their reviews of *No Country*, Royal Brown and Christopher Sharrett (2008) recap this critical

dilemma discussing the many ways that the film has been classified, a chase film, a crime thriller, a psycho-killer film, a western, and even an anti-western film to name a few (p. 8). *No Country* is just another exemplar of the difficulty of pinning down a Coen brothers' film to a specific genre, hybrid genre, or sub-genre. Unlike the majority of filmmakers, the Coens have been successful at sampling what appears to be a wide variety of film genres. Josh Levine (2000) argues that the Coens have moved from genre to genre, film noir (*Blood Simple*, 1984), comedy (*Raising Arizona*, 1987), the gangster film (*Miller's Crossing*, 1990), satire/horror (*Barton Fink*, 1991), the realistic thriller (*Fargo*, 1996), and the slacker film (*The Big Lebowski*, 1998), but in actuality the difficulty shared by critics who attempt to pin down the Coens' films may be due to an all-encompassing generic mastery and an immense knowledge of cinema. Nonetheless, the Coens' body of work illustrates the common subject matter of absurdity.

### ***THE COENS AND GENRE***

The Coens' unique collection of films and the plethora of genres they draw from and in turn reshape make it quite apparent that their body of work cannot be neatly filed into genre categorizations like that of many other respected filmmakers. However, what remains a staple for the Coens throughout their dabbling in, and remodeling of, many different film genres is the blend of *farce* and *tragedy*, a combination that, according to Oliver (1963), represents the "double mask of absurdity" (p. 226).

Perhaps best described by Maurice Charney (1978), in his broad discussion of the experience of comedy, farce represents a comedy with an extravagant plot in which anything can happen. In farce characters are developed by "quirks and eccentricities rather than according to any believable, psychological truth" (p. 95). A tragedy, on the

other hand, signifies a film that primarily evokes feelings of sorrow and grief. Charney considers farce to be the purest form of comedy as it meticulously excludes all sentiment. In farce, comedy can then be experienced in complete simplicity as feelings of sympathy, compassion and empathy are prevented. Nevertheless, achieving both the farcical and the tragic simultaneously, as the Coen brothers and other absurdist do, results in what Charney logically identifies as the tragic farce, where the “themes and techniques of the tragedy have been absorbed and comically transformed” (p. 105). What prevails in this generic combination, as Oliver (1963) asserts, is extreme irony, a concept that is no stranger to the Coen brothers (Tasker, 1996). Such an unconventional combination of tragedy and farce leaves the audience in an uneasy state where they may experience the dreadful, disastrous and heartbreaking events of the tragedy with self-conscious laughter. Gone are the feelings of grief and sorrow previously attached to tragic events. This ironic imposition on the audience is possibly best explained by Oliver when he declares that the commingling generic qualities of the Theatre of the Absurd make “us laugh at that which hurts us most” and “weep at that which is most foolish in our nature” (1963, p. 226). Such irony has been prominent within the works of playwrights Beckett, Adamov, Ionesco and Genet who collectively constitute the Theatre of the Absurd. Similarly, the prominence of irony can be recognized within the ever-growing collection of absurdist crime films, as it appears that irony is integral to any form of absurdist drama. Oliver proclaims that all absurdist are “in the best sense of the word, ironists,” a title that applies to the Coen brothers (1963, p. 226).

The importance of irony to absurdism comes with little surprise as both thrive on the dilemma of discerning meaning. Irony may most commonly be defined through a



linguistic approach where words hold a dual sense of meaning, where one may say what is contrary to what is actually meant (Colebrook, 2004 p. 1). However, the Coens' use of irony cannot simply be limited to speech or language as it is so central to the design of their films. Routinely, the Coen brothers create their plotlines through the use of what Claire Colebrook (2004) describes as dramatic irony, a form of irony that unravels the storyline with a clear disjunction between character and audience viewpoint. In addition, the Coen brothers also subject their characters to what Colebrook refers to as cosmic irony or the irony of existence. In the irony of existence "it is as though human life and its understandings of the world is undercut by some other meaning or design beyond our powers" (p. 10). The Coens' exploitation of the irony of existence suggests that meaning may always be just beyond our grasp, while conversely dramatic irony reminds us of our ignorance of our circumstances as human beings.

Throughout the course of the Coen brothers' films the audience is often afforded more knowledge about the direction of their narratives than their protagonists. While the viewer likely understands the direction of the plot and what may ensue, the Coens' characters negotiate their actions based on information that the audience knows to be false. The Coens' *Blood Simple* situates the audience in a God-like position where they have insight into simultaneous interlacing storylines. The plot of *Blood Simple* revolves around four central characters: the saloon owner and disgruntled husband Julian Marty (Dan Hedaya), slimy private investigator Loren Visser (M. Emmet Walsh), adulterous wife Abby (Frances McDormand), and her lover as well as Marty's bartender, Ray (John Getz). Marty, infuriated at Abby's infidelity and Ray's betrayal, solicits Visser to murder both Ray and Abby. Visser schemingly manipulates a photo of Ray and Abby sleeping

together to make it appear as though it is a portrait verifying their deaths. When Visser shows Marty the doctored photo, Marty, seemingly sickened by the graphic nature of the doctored photo relieves himself in the restroom where he, unbeknownst to Visser, replaces the photo with a sign demanding that “all employees must wash their hands before returning to work.” After Marty returns from the restroom and compensates Visser for his services, Visser, knowing that Marty will eventually come to the realization that both Ray and Abby are in fact alive, double crosses Marty, shooting him in the stomach with a gun previously taken from Abby’s purse, framing her in the process.

During the enactment of Visser and Marty’s business dealings, neither Abby nor Ray has any intuition of the seriousness of the conspiracy that surrounds them. On one hand Marty is attempting to have them both killed and on the other Visser is attempting to frame them for murder. When Ray revisits Marty’s office to recover his last earned pay he finds both Marty’s body and Abby’s gun. Assuming that Abby has killed Marty, Ray attempts to clean up the crime scene and dispose of the body. It is not until Ray attempts to bury Marty that he realizes that Marty is still alive, and Ray takes it upon himself to dispose of Marty, burying him alive to conceal what he believes to be Abby’s crime. All the while, Abby remains ignorant of her plight. She is still fearful of Marty and what he might do, although he is dead, as well as confused by Ray’s peculiar demeanor. When Visser eventually realizes the manipulated photo of Ray and Abby is not in his possession, he returns to Marty’s office to attempt to break into the safe and recover the photo, but he finds the crime scene has already been cleaned up. However, because Visser is not able to break into the safe, the photo is left for Ray, who holds the combination, to find. Visser, afraid of being incriminated, although neither Ray nor

Abby know of his existence, follows Ray to Abby's new apartment where he sets up on an adjacent rooftop and guns down Ray before pursuing Abby. Abby then prepares to defend herself against the man she thinks is Marty trying to kill her. The film then concludes at its ironic climax where Abby blindly shoots Visser through her bathroom wall as she exclaims, "I'm not afraid of you Marty," and Visser sardonically replies, "Well ma'am, if I see him, I'll sure give him the message."

Through their use of dramatic irony the Coens do not afford a full understanding of their plotlines to any given character. Each is at the mercy of the storyline. In films such as *Blood Simple* when individual character plotlines converge the outcome is often ironic. What each character relies upon is undercut by what actually is. The same is true for the majority of the Coens' films. *Burn After Reading* (2008), for example, follows many character narratives all intertwined to create a cohesive plot filled with irony where many of its characters do not even meet. *Fargo*, a film centering on a kidnapping conspiracy set in motion by Jerry Lundegaard (William H. Macy), exhibits multiple interrelated characters none of whom comprehend the motivations of those around them. Jerry has his own wife, Jean (Kristin Rudrud), kidnapped in order to collect the ransom from his wealthy father-in-law. Kidnapper, Carl Showalter (Steve Buscemi) demands a higher ransom, concealing it from his partner Gaear Grimsrud (Peter Stormare), who later kills and shoves Carl through a wood-chipper. Situating the spectators in this God-like position, where they are capable of observing and recognizing the radical disparity between what the Coens' characters believe or anticipate and what actually transpires calls to mind the inescapable absurdity of the human condition. As God-like figures the

audience understands the fate of the Coens' characters, but the characters cannot escape the absurdity to do so.

Colebrook (2004) defines the irony of existence as the "limits of human meaning" (p. 14). This form of irony also bears witness to the discrepancies between characters' expectations and fates. However, the Coens often draw on the audience's generic expectations to exact a similar satirical outcome. In *Fargo* the irony of existence is lurking around every corner. The film commences with Jerry Lundegaard already in dire need of some fast cash to cover up what is thought to be embezzlement at the car dealership where he works as executive sales manager. As a result Jerry has his wife kidnapped, intending to collect the majority of the ransom for himself, but at the same time his wealthy father-in-law shows keen interest in a business proposition Jerry had proposed in the past. When Jerry feels he has no options left he acts accordingly, putting his wife's life at risk only to discover his earlier business proposition may be profitable. Similarly, near *Fargo*'s conclusion, Gaear attempts to dispose of Carl's body by processing him through a wood-chipper, but the outcome is highly noticeable as a sizable area of thick red blood and bone matter is encircled by pure white snow.

The Coen brothers' use of conventional generic elements also arouses expectations for the audience. However, these expectations are rarely met as they redirect the audience to an eccentric result. This method exercised in all their films appears to criticize contemporary society for its dependence on a conformist linear philosophy in a world where meaning arguably cannot be determined. A particular method often employed by the Coen brothers to challenge the established meanings contemporary society accepts is their sarcastic use of popular music.

Although the Coen brothers have worked very closely with composer Carter Burwell, who created much of the original music in nearly all of the Coens' films, their films often skillfully integrate popular music. This incorporation is, however, usually ironic. Thriving on the deconstruction of a popular hit's original meaning, the Coens incorporate a popular song that stands in direct contrast to the conventional mood of a given scene, mocking predetermined societal notions or, conversely, sarcastically exacerbating them. In *Blood Simple* this form of ironic nostalgia is noteworthy in the scene where Ray is attempting to clean up the murder scene at Marty's club. As Ray begins to scrub Marty's blood off the hardwood flooring with his jacket, oddly enough worsening the mess by smearing it all over the floor, The Four Tops 1965 song "It's the Same Old Song" begins to play in the rest of the saloon, providing Ray with an unlikely soundtrack. This choice of song is not only ironic because it is a song about getting hurt by love, evoking Marty's situation which eventually culminates in his death, but also because of the song's upbeat nature and melody. Rather than employing a song of demonic quality that would classically be incorporated into a scene of such violent implications, the Coens utilize an unexpected song with a joyous melody to offset the morbid feel of the scene and persuade the audience to enjoy the gruesome experience.

In *Fargo* the same ironic use of popular music takes place. At the beginning of the film, the audience encounters Jerry Lundegaard driving through acres of undeveloped land in the dead of winter. Once he arrives at a small local tavern, it is quite apparent that the film takes place in a rural setting. Alone this may seem insignificant, but when Jerry enters the bar and approaches two thugs and solicits them to kidnap his wife, Merle Haggard's "Big City" (1981) provides the accompaniment to their conversation. While

the conversation between Jerry and the thugs reveals Jerry's discontent with his present situation and his difficulties with money, Haggard's "Big City" presents quite a contrast to *Fargo*'s portrayal of rural living. We see Jerry, an individual trapped and unhappy with his existence, whilst listening to Haggard's utopian portrayal of rural living, depicting country life as uncomplicated and free. Comparable to a chief purpose of the Theatre of the Absurd, the Coen brothers effectively incite two opposing emotions simultaneously, describing the rural setting as both alluring and unappetizing, another instance of tragic comedy. But perhaps the most indicative sign of the ironic imposition that absurdist place on their audience is dark humour.

### ***DARK HUMOUR***

With their astute knowledge of film history and their ability to integrate many generic elements concurrently, the Coen brothers have been able to interweave drama, suspense, violence, horror and crime, but their specialty may arguably lie in their ability to combine humour with all of the aforementioned. This sort of humour, most commonly referred to as *dark humour*, is enmeshed within absurdist drama's ironic quality, as both dark humour and irony share the same unconventional roots in tragic farce. Combining the elements of both tragedy and farce, the Coen brothers aim to make their audience laugh at the most serious and horrifying events like murder, severe injury, infidelity, and misfortune.

As has been duly noted, absurdist dramas have been admired for the combination of tragedy and the comedy. However, for the Coen brothers this may be something of an understatement. Because of the extent to which the Coen Brothers embed dark humour

throughout their films it becomes difficult to understand tragedy apart from the comedy. It is as though the Coen brothers have altered the standpoint from which to view and understand both the tragedy and the comedy, and within their films these elements rarely ever appear separately. Incidents of horror are humorous and humour is horrifying. But what is most noteworthy is the death of the tragedy. As absurdist thought has infiltrated into contemporary Hollywood crime films, it brings about the complete removal of sorrow. Through the postmodern “waning of affect” discussed by Jameson (1991, p. 10) one can expect a liberation from all feelings. In the absurdist films of the Coen brothers and the like, dark humour is only serious through its philosophical and existential implications.

Through the Coen brothers’ use of dark humour they remove seriousness from otherwise dark situations. Often the Coens contrive dark humour by contributing comical and joking dialogue to violent or dark physical acts or events. On the other hand, the Coen brothers depict dark humour as natural to contemporary society. In this more controversial manner, dark aspects of life need not have humour attached because dark humour naturally exists as a morbid element of contemporary society. The later method for employing dark humour has arguably emerged as more commonplace within the Coen brothers’ films. This suggests that there is currently a greater acceptance of absurdity by both the Coens and their audience. Consequently, the distinction between sorrow and seriousness gradually becomes more difficult to decipher.

As acknowledged earlier, *Blood Simple*’s plot circles around the destruction of Marty and Abby’s marriage. When Marty initially learns of Abby’s infidelity, his frustration overloads and he attempts to confront her. The confrontation turns into a

physical struggle where, in order to free herself from Marty's grasp, Abby breaks his finger and kicks him in the groin. Further enraged, Marty sets up a meeting with Loren Visser to recruit him to kill both Abby and her new lover Ray (John Getz). In the scene where Marty and Visser meet at a youth hang-out overlooking a valley below, more attention is drawn to Marty's braced finger than the rage and irritation he is experiencing. The amusement and comedy of Marty's injury add humour and seemingly trump the grim matter of infidelity and murder. The scene opens to Richard Berry's "Louie Louie" (1955) and a close-up of Marty's swinging braced finger as he walks towards Visser. While Marty looks as if he could be on the verge of a murderous rampage, the audience's attention is diverted to his broken finger by numerous jokes emasculating him. Before Marty reaches Visser, a young guy at the look-off teases him for his injury asking: "Hey, mister, how'd you break your pussy finger?" Visser only pours more salt on Marty's wound: "Stick your finger up the wrong person's ass?" Then finally the humour of Marty's broken finger culminates in Visser's telling of a joke relating to a similar injury:

You know a friend of mine a while back broke his hand and put it in a cast. The very next day, he falls, protects his bad hand and he breaks his good one... So now hes got two busted flippers. So I says to him, I said Creighton, I hope your wife really loves you, cause for the next five weeks, you can't even wipe your own goddamn ass.

Throughout all the foolery pertaining to Marty's injury, his irritation only builds, yet we are left involuntarily laughing at his misfortune. Associating such humorous dialogue with Marty's injury is a prime example of dark humour.

Similarly, in *Fargo* one can identify the strategic timing of Marge's morning sickness as a tactful way to incorporate humour into an otherwise disturbing scene.

When Marge gets word of the triple homicide along the highway, she heads to the scene



of the crime where she meets up with a fellow officer, Lou, and, while examining the body of one of the deceased, she is struck with morning sickness:

LOU: You see something down there chief

MARGE: No I just think I'm gonna barf

LOU: You okay Margie

MARGE: Yeah I'm fine. It's just morning sickness... Well that passed

LOU: Yeah?

MARGE: Yeah, now I'm hungry again.

Although the scene takes place at the site of the murders, the bodies and blood of the departed only make up the backdrop. All attention is afforded to Marge, and it is comical that she is sick from her pregnancy and not the unpleasantness of dealing with dead, gory bodies. This is comical because her morning sickness is completely unexpected, and once her spell passes she swiftly props herself up and decides that it is time for lunch.

However *Fargo* also flaunts dark humour that is less suggestive and blatantly visual. It is here where emotions induced by tragedy are gone and only those of comedy remain. When Jerry's wife is successfully captured and taken to a remote location she finds an opportunity to escape as soon as she is let out of the car. In most crime films this would trigger the formulaic chase scene in which the victim typically nearly gets away as the captor, wildly in pursuit, hunts the captive down, but *Fargo* is quite a different story. Rather than chasing after Jean, Carl stops his partner, Gaear, just short of running after her. The comedy in this scene lies in the fact that Jean, attempting to run for her life, is blindfolded and has no idea which way to run. Jean quickly runs back and forth switching her direction, and falling down. Her antics are reminiscent of a chicken with

its head cut off. If this were not comical enough, the Coen brothers draw more attention to her helplessness through Carl, as he sits back and enjoys Jean's struggle to escape, laughing and snorting exclaiming, "Whoops," when she stumbles to the ground. The humour in Jean's chicken run, with Carl's enjoyment, makes the comedy difficult to overlook, marking a blatant attempt by the Coens to entice their audience to ignore the tragic and appreciate the dark humour.

The Coens continually place their characters in dark situations, exposing them to injury, crime and death, but the nature of each of their characters make these situations surprisingly funny. The Coens' use of such rare and unusual characters seems to only exacerbate the comedy of dark situations. Very rarely do the Coen brothers depict relatively 'normal' individuals in their films. On the contrary, it appears as though they follow a more farcical formula for manufacturing their characters' personas. As Charney (1978) has postulated, the characters of farce are not developed according to any believable or psychological truths but rather from "quirks and eccentricities" (p.97). Similarly, in postmodern films like the Coens' there are no psychological truths and characters appear as pastiche. While the characters are reflective of typical film personalities, such as the female police officer, country locals, experienced criminals, or veteran police officers, they are not confined to conventional cinematic expectations. Rather than portraying standard replicas of generic cinema, the Coen brothers deconstruct common character types and recreate them as unconventionally hilarious. The most noteworthy of examples are arguably Frances McDormand's representation of police chief Marge Gunderson in *Fargo* and the Dude, a slacker turned unlikely hero in *The Big Lebowski* (1998).

Many crime films such as Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), Barbet Schroeder's *Murder by Numbers* (2002), D.J. Caruso's *Taking Lives* (2004), and Kathryn Bigelow's *Blue Steel* (1989) depict lead female characters in pivotal roles. But these films often explore the trials and tribulations faced by female police officers, emphasizing their tyrannization, persecution, and even victimization. Conversely, the Coen brothers deconstruct the common role of the female police officer with Marge Gunderson. Unlike most female police officers in film, Marge is police chief, and not only does she do most of the investigative work herself, her male counterpart is incapable of producing any police work with confidence. Furthermore, Marge surpasses expectations as police chief fulfilling all her duties while seven months pregnant, even single handedly arresting a murderer caught in the act. Exaggerations can also be found in characters of less significance, like the local prostitutes (Melissa Peterman and Larissa Kokernot) in *Fargo* whose best description of the suspected murderer is only that he was "funny looking," or Jack Lipnick (Michael Lerner) of *Barton Fink*, the overzealous president of Capital Pictures. The Coens' characters exist as nostalgia pieces. The Coen brothers are able to consume fragments of the past and portray them in a new form through such characters.

While the Coen brothers have been making some of the most ironic films, displaying a high degree of absurdism, rather than pushing one to think about the messages behind their films, they encourage the audience to laugh at the most inappropriate of times with little remorse for their conduct and little awareness of the philosophical implications. The Coen brothers' arrangement of violence, comedy and surprise, similarly to the Theatre of the Absurd, pulls the wool over the viewers' eyes

sheltering many from the suggested meaninglessness of human existence. However, messages of absurdity may resonate in an audience that is open to philosophical thinking. The Coens' uncanny use of genre and their exploitation of irony and dark humour camouflage the absurdist messages lying within their films. To borrow again from Oliver's (1963) analogy, absurdity must be a "comedy-coated pill." In other words, in order for the message of absurdity to be taken seriously it must initially be easy to swallow (p. 229).

### ***CONCLUDING THE COENS***

As explained earlier, the growth of the Theatre of the Absurd accelerated in the post World War Two era through the rapid decline of faith in religion and humanity. Correspondingly, while some of the Coens' films do adopt a post Vietnam War vision of American society as in *No Country* and *The Big Lebowski*, which follow or incorporate Vietnam veteran characters, their films repeatedly depict an environment in which individuals have little devotion to human life or the divine.

In their directorial debut, *Blood Simple*, the Coen brothers borrowed their title from police jargon whereby 'blood simple' represents a criminal's loss of rationality at the moment of committing a crime, thus leaving incriminating evidence behind. Similarly, *Fargo*, set in the bitter winter of North Dakota, deals with the concept of 'snow blindness', a metaphor used by Thomas Hibbs (2009 p. 36) to explain the comedy of errors performed by *Fargo*'s featured criminals as a product of the near whiteout conditions. As *Blood Simple* depicts characters with a loss of control over rational thought, *Fargo* portrays criminals who have developed what Hibbs describes as a "self-deceiving illusion of infallibility" (2009 p. 36). The criminal characters in *Fargo* develop

a false sense of control over their environment when they indisputably cannot see much more than two feet in any direction.

While the concepts of ‘snow blindness’ and going ‘blood simple’ are quite different, they do represent a striking theme consistently revisited by the Coen brothers, that theme being the everlasting ignorance of human beings. Both *Blood Simple* and *Fargo* begin by illustrating the inability we have as a species to actively know much of anything with certainty. There may always be a disparity between what is implied and what comes to fruition. *Blood Simple* begins with the narration of private investigator Loren Visser. He proclaims, “The world is full of complainers but the fact is nothing comes with a guarantee.” If there are no ‘guarantees’ then arguably there is no way of being sure of any outcome. On the other hand, *Fargo* ridicules our tendency to rely on such falsehoods by introducing a film of such radical and improbable coincidences and proportions ironically with a disclaimer declaring that what follows is indeed true:

THIS IS A TRUE STORY.

The events depicted in this film  
took place in Minnesota in 1987.

At the request of the survivors,  
the names have been changed.

Out of respect for the dead,  
the rest has been told exactly  
as it occurred.

The Coens and their films not only encourage us to leave behind assumptions pertaining to genre, they encourage us to reflect on the assumptions we base our lives upon. By suggesting an alternative to the cultural dominant through their films they urge us to examine our cultural perspective.

In the absurd world of the Coen brothers, the diminishing faith in humanity has taken that which was once tragic and reduced it to farce. Subtracting meaning from human life converts tragedy to a new form of comedy, more specifically dark comedy. Without a belief in divine direction human beings reach such a solipsistic state that the world seems to exist for no other reason but to fulfill our every want and desire but we simply exist for no understandable reason. The Coen brothers' films depict a world affected by what Nietzsche (Hibbs, 2009, p. 29) called the "death of God." With the "death of God" religion and the afterlife are no longer relevant and living the life of a saint is therefore completely meaningless. The absence of god leaves humankind in a completely absurd predicament. Without a higher power, human life is without meaning. However, if we as human beings live only to satisfy our own wants and desires we are placed in a different predicament, and we can become consumed by our own devices and free to do as we please. This is a fatal flaw for many of the Coens' characters. Their egos expand to godlike proportions and they fail to recognize themselves as mortal beings within their surroundings. They subsequently free themselves from rational thought and become 'blood simple' or 'snow blind.' However, because human beings cannot become god the absurdity of the human condition is inescapable. The Coens' characters are forced to face their absurdity but are never capable of overcoming it, because the unforgiving laws of the human condition apply universally to everyone.

## CHAPTER 2

### QUENTIN TARANTINO

Although absurdist crime films have prompted little analytical examination to date, Quentin Tarantino has been considered the “boy wonder” of this growing sub-genre of film (Rafter, 2006, p. 54). With little education, Tarantino decided that he would drop out of school in only the ninth grade to pursue a career in the film industry. Initially having difficulty breaking into the industry as an actor, Tarantino turned to writing. It was not until his fifth script and debut as a director with *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) that Tarantino was able to achieve a significant level of success. The success of *Reservoir Dogs* did however kick-start his career as both a director and a writer. His initial scripts were subsequently sold, two of which became well-known blockbuster films, Tony Scott’s *True Romance* (1994) and Oliver Stone’s *Natural Born Killers* (1994). After the release of his second film *Pulp Fiction* (1994), the first independent film to reach blockbuster status, Tarantino had solidified his position within Hollywood and film history. To date he has directed seven major films and has received much notoriety for his use of unrelenting violence, profanity, dark humour, and extreme masculinity (Briggs, 2003). *Tarantinoesque* has now become used as an adjective to describe all that is “edgy, politically incorrect, violent and male” (Briggs, 2003, p. 217).

While Tarantino’s films continue to stand out against traditional Hollywood films, Rafter (2006) associates his work with a growing postmodern trend within cinema. Originating in the 1980s, directors such as David Lynch, Brian De Palma and Joel and Ethan Coen adopted a postmodernist approach distinguishable from a traditional

approach through their appropriation of the styles of early directors and classic Hollywood. Rafter links Tarantino to the aforementioned directors as he shares a tendency to pay excessive homage to styles and directors of the past as well as a propensity to realign and blend genres to the extent that they are not easily recognizable. On the other hand, a Tarantino film is quite easily recognizable.

Tarantino's films have been considered as either a display of radical sensationalism or a realistic look at contemporary society. While this may be a common debate, his films can arguably be understood as a simultaneous representation of both. Although it may appear that Tarantino's films provide critics few realistic views of modern-day society, one can argue that Tarantino intentionally exaggerates the relationship between reality and his films. If Tarantino's films were to be taken as an evaluation of contemporary society, they would reveal a grotesquely superficial image. There would be no room for those elements like kindness and compassion that are conventionally considered when contemplating humanity. While this assessment may seem a little excessive, the frequency with which the media bombard us with depictions of rape, murder, kidnapping, arson and war is unquestionably high. Tarantino's tendency to sensationalize violence, crime and popular culture therefore provides a realistic portrayal of contemporary society as the media depict it.

Much like other experienced and bankable filmmakers, Tarantino habitually draws on similar stylistic elements when making his films but what may be equally important is the interplay that ties his elements together. Tarantino interlaces extreme violence, dark humour, popular culture, and hard-boiled dialogue, and they are orchestrated in such a manner that they fuel one another. The alluring nature of these



elements also often overshadows a perception of reality in Tarantino's films: that perception being that reality, or more precisely life, is usually taken too seriously. Assisting Tarantino's efforts to express this view of life is a mixture of realism and playfulness that radiates from the entirety of a Tarantino film. The building blocks of Tarantino's films are incorporated into an ongoing relationship with and between realism and playfulness, producing dark humour as his films continuously poke fun at the reality of crime, violence and death. Furthermore, there is a lack of philosophical and moral content within Tarantino's films, which understandably negates any ethical or moral conclusions but also projects a major misconception about his films, that they can only be consumed for their superficial qualities. However, in Tarantino's case what is excluded from his films is just as significant as what is included. In terms of the 'dialectical approach' proposed by Rafter (2006), wherein crime films draw from and in turn shape social thought, the lack of attention granted to philosophical and moral content by Tarantino may be a focal point for understanding the assumptions about the nature of contemporary society that he proposes in his films. What follows is an examination of the aspects of Tarantino's films that collectively reflect that there is little or no seriousness in reality and life.

### ***REAL VIOLENCE***

The first of Tarantino's techniques to be explored is his playful yet realistic use of time. In depicting realistic representations of violence and crime, Tarantino slows down movie time constructing his plots primarily around specific violent events. Rather than unraveling a lengthy tale spanning a time period of weeks, months or even years,

Tarantino's films account for a time period rarely longer than an afternoon or a day. In *Reservoir Dogs* the bulk of the story takes place within an abandoned warehouse, in over an hour of movie time, allowing the audience the opportunity to witness everything that occurs as it occurs. Similarly, *Pulp Fiction* slides back and forth through time beginning with nearly the conclusion of the film at a diner where thieves, Yolanda (Amanda Plummer) and Ringo (Tim Roth) (otherwise known as Honey Bunny and Pumpkin), plan to rob the diner and all its patrons. The plot then proceeds to develop the events of the day leading up to the conclusion, beginning with Vincent Vega's (John Travolta) and Jules Winnfield's (Samuel L. Jackson) first job of the morning at 7:22 and concluding with Butch Coolidge's (Bruce Willis) getaway the following morning. In both instances Tarantino presents a storyline that follows what appears to be every move of his main characters. Although his films are often made up of many different storylines, each character's story is revealed to the audience so that they do not miss a beat, in many cases even following them to the toilet.

Tarantino's tendency to create films through the incorporation of real time certainly contributes a more realistic experience of violence. For Tarantino the relationship between time and violence is a key element for the depiction of what he calls "real violence." In an interview for the *New York Times*, Tarantino comments on his technique for portraying violence, stating that it is about "stopping movie time and playing the violence out in real time. Letting nothing get in the way of it and letting it happen the way real violence does" (McAlevey, 1992, p. 80). In his examination of racism and the portrayal of violence in film, Henry Giroux (1995) identifies Tarantino's approach to violence as postmodern. He recognizes Tarantino for his tendency to

decelerate conventional movie violence, giving his films a realistic quality through depiction of violence and crime. Possibly the most compelling example of Tarantino's decelerated violence can be found in *Reservoir Dogs*. Following the opening credits *Reservoir Dogs* jumps into its opening scene with a bleeding Mr. Orange (Tim Roth) in the back of a getaway car. Rather than taking him to the hospital where he would receive adequate medical attention, Mr. White (Harvey Keitel) is obliged to take him to the squad's rendezvous point, an abandoned warehouse. As the film progresses Mr. Orange continues to bleed until by the end a puddle of his blood has become so large that it completely consumes him. The audience literally spends an hour and forty minutes witnessing a man bleed to death screaming in pain and agony and drifting in and out of consciousness.

Similarly, in one of Tarantino's more recent films, *Death Proof* (2007), he slows down the traditional high-speed car chase, revealing an eighteen-minute long thrill ride. However, real violence is not simply the portrayal of violent acts in a realistic time frame. Tarantino recognizes it as much more:

Violence is part of this world and I am drawn to the outrageousness of real-life violence. It isn't about people lowering people from helicopters on to speeding trains, or about terrorists hijacking something or other. Real-life violence is, you're in a restaurant and a man and his wife are having an argument and all of a sudden the guy gets so mad at her, he picks up a fork and stabs her in the face. That's really crazy and comic-bookish – but it also happens; that's how real violence comes kicking and screaming into your perspective in real life. (Fuller, 1993, p. 59)

According to Tarantino real violence is that which is unpredictable, unexpected, and rarely fathomable. Real violence is the type of violence that catches us off guard and shocks us. Perhaps this is better put by Ringo of *Pulp Fiction* who emphatically states, "It's like one minute they're eatin a Denver omelet and the next minute they've got a gun

in their face.” By this definition real violence is profoundly absurd and countless examples of this variety of violence are found within Tarantino’s films.

When violence is encountered in Tarantino’s films it is nearly always unexpected. In *Reservoir Dogs* Mr. Orange’s dire situation with his gunshot wound is unpredictable because the film commences with the shock of his death already in progress. Furthermore, an elderly lady has fired the gunshot that leaves him bleeding for the remainder of the film. When Mr. Orange and Mr. White are attempting to car jack the elderly lady, possibly the most unsuspected of characters, she retrieves a handgun from the dash of her car and shoots Mr. Orange in the stomach.

Tarantino’s films contain many other examples of equally, if not more, unexpected and unfathomable violence. In *Pulp Fiction*, while Vincent and Jules attempt to escort a very young drug dealer, Marvin (Phil LaMarr), back to their boss, they engage Marvin in a discussion of divine intervention. When Vincent turns around to face Marvin in the back seat of Jules’ car to ask him his opinion, he inadvertently shoots him in the face. Similarly, later in the film when Butch is on his way out of town attempting to avoid Marsellus Wallace (Ving Rhames) and his hit men, he unexpectedly encounters Marsellus in a cross walk where he then attempts to flatten him. While there are many other examples, the height of shock and real violence is arguably found in *Pulp Fiction*. Similar to the unexpected source of violence originating from the elderly lady, the unexplainable firing of Vincent’s gun, and the ironic chance of bumping into those who want to kill you, the most sadistic portrayal of real violence in Tarantino’s films occurs in the scene interrupting the murderous confrontation between Butch and Marsellus. As Marsellus trails Butch into what appears to be a pawnshop during their brutal battle, the

shop owner, Maynard, unexpectedly holds them both captive with his shotgun stating, “Nobody kills anyone in my store except me and Zed,” but the biggest surprise is yet to come. Upon the arrival of Zed, who happens to be a police officer, the audience becomes aware of both his and Maynard’s plans to rape, sodomize and kill both Butch and Marsellus.

These extremely graphic and unanticipated portrayals of real violence periodically come kicking and screaming into Tarantino’s films with little relevance to their plots. Much like the violence all too often faced by many in reality, we are left dumbfounded in the wake of its occurrence. Disconcertingly, the majority of those examples are accompanied with humour, a marriage in Tarantino’s films that results in an element of dark humour that will now be explored.

### ***DARK HUMOUR***

Tarantino’s morbid fascination with real violence is matched with a sense of humour not unlike that displayed within a Coen brothers’ film, although the methods for employing dark humour do differ. Tarantino’s films have been characterized as “slice-of-life films” that treat violence and crime lightly, often prompting laughter at displays of carnage and mutilation (Rafter, 2006, p. 54). This description by Rafter accounts for the combination of real violence and humour. He is able to deduct emotion from violence and crime by approaching them through comedy. Dark humour is then coupled with the portrayal of real violence in Tarantino’s films and, likewise, the two elements arise through the same process. While real violence is revealed through its unfathomable, unexpected nature, dark humour is also an accompanying by-product. In Tarantino’s films real violence and dark humour are inseparable. The torture scene in *Reservoir*

*Dogs*, arguably one of the most memorable scenes from 1990s cinema, is a brilliant example of this relationship that Tarantino creates between real violence and humour.

This scene begins with Mr. Blonde (Michael Madsen) tuning in an old radio to a local radio show, K-BILLY's "Super Sounds of the '70s," and the radio emits a peaceful harmony with "Stuck in the Middle With You," an upbeat pop song by Stealers Wheel. Mr. Blonde then comically performs, dancing and singing along with the song before he begins cutting up the helpless police officer and severing his ear. As Stealers Wheel continues to play in the background, the comedy continues through the violence of the scene. After Mr. Blonde successfully amputates the officer's ear, he proceeds to tease the officer asking, "Was that as good for you as it was for me?" and speaking right into his severed ear saying, "Hey. What's goin on? You hear that?" while chuckling to himself. In this example, real violence and dark humour emerge at the same time. Initially the scene is viewed as playful and humorous, which reinforces the unexpectedness of the violence that follows. On the other hand, the act of torturing and cutting off the police officer's ear is irrelevant to the plot of the film. Before Mr. Blonde begins to torture and mutilate the officer, he unsympathetically expresses the pointlessness of the pain and suffering the cop is about to endure:

Look, I'm not gonna bullshit you, okay? I don't really give a good fuck what you know or don't know... but I'm gonna torture you anyway... regardless. Not to get information. It's amusing to me to torture a cop. You can say anything you want because I've heard it all before. All you can do is... pray for a quick death... which you ain't gonna get.

Other than the pure enjoyment experienced by Mr. Blonde, there is no explanation for the torture of the officer. The unexpected and the perplexing comprise real violence and dark humour at the same time.

Tarantino's preference for depicting what constitutes real violence alongside humour suggests that he approaches real violence as comical: "I don't take violence very seriously. I find violence very funny, and especially in the stories I've been telling lately" (Fuller, 1993, p. 59). After viewing his films, this is exactly the kind of attitude one would expect Tarantino to have toward violence.

Tarantino confronts the audience with many scenes of atrocious violence, and each time the severity of the carnage is downplayed by the reaction of his characters. In *Pulp Fiction*, after Vincent accidentally shoots Marvin's entire head off at point blank range, the severity of the shooting, ending a very young man's life, is devalued as Vincent and Jules' only concern is for the mess that results in Jules' car. When the seriousness of the situation sets in and the two go to Jimmie's (Quentin Tarantino) house for help, the gory act of cleaning blood and brain matter out of Jules' car is much less frightening than the possible repercussions faced if Jimmie's wife returns home before Vincent and Jules clear out.

Tarantino's approach to violence and humour proposes a more advanced absurdist point of view than his predecessors in the Theatre of the Absurd. Rather than depicting a combination of tragedy and comedy, Tarantino illustrates a world without tragedy, a view of the world triggered by his severance of seriousness from violence. In Tarantino's films violence is realistic but never tragic.

Throughout his films Tarantino presents a playful interpretation of the unpleasant side of reality. When those "realistic" aspects of his films such as violence and crime are represented, it is done in a playful manner. One might expect Tarantino's propensity for the realistic and the playful to clash, but this is not the case. A clash of these two

attitudes is not an option as they are one and the same. Tarantino presents a world full of crime and violence, but a debate over what is morally right and wrong never transpires. Tarantino's films take away the seriousness of life and reality and urge the audience to laugh and join in on the fun. Stuntman Mike (Kurt Russell) from Tarantino's most recent film *Death Proof* even acknowledges the audience, smiling and laughing at the onset of graphic violence and the near death experience of others.

A playful approach to all aspects of life, especially the negative, is also fundamental to absurdity. Patricia Pisters (2003) links Tarantino's representation of dark humour to the absurdist philosophy. She too describes the laughter evoked by Tarantino's films as playful, not because the version of the world he displays in his films excludes reality but because "reality is so impossible and absurd" (p. 104). From Pisters' viewpoint Tarantino's version of the world is reflective of reality. The playful attitude exploited within Tarantino's films is a product of the absurdity of reality.

John Lippitt (1992) describes the act of playful laughter in the face of life's absurdity as an act of *happy despair*. Lippitt explains the act of laughing at the most horrific and negative aspects of life as the "highest affirmation of life possible" (p. 41). It involves accepting the complexity of the absurdity of life and mocking its very nature, and Tarantino's films leave the audience in just this position. His ability to make the audience laugh at the onset of violence forces the acknowledgment of the absurdity of the human condition. His playful approach to crime and violence may allow us to enjoy it as pure play but the very act of laughing signifies the absurdity or our state of *happy despair*. While Tarantino's audience is indeed laughing at fiction and fictitious characters, those situations relate to contemporary society. His characters and plotlines



may be somewhat improbable but the real violence that he depicts, whether we like it or not, is an accurate representation of society. It is as though Tarantino is encouraging his audience to accept absurdity by placing them in the position where they are able to laugh at situations in film that mirror reality, cleverly forcing his audience to share the predicament of his characters.

### ***TARANTINO AND HIS OWN TRADITION***

Tarantino's immense reliance on popular icons reflects the significance that past fads and trends in entertainment and popular culture have for our contemporary society. Just as violence and popular culture make up a considerable portion of our history they make up a significant portion of Tarantino's films. Tarantino's ability to exploit popular culture, along with his affinity for the deceleration of movie time and violence, exemplifies a gritty representation of the seamy side of civilization.

In contrast to other directors, such as the Coen brothers, who portray normal everyday small town characters entrenched in the most bizarre and ironic of plots and situations, Tarantino portrays a variety of extremely unusual and abnormal characters positioned in equally abnormal scenarios. Rather than small town auto dealers, local bar owners, and country bumpkins, Tarantino's characters are experienced thieves, gun dealers, hit men and drug lords. His films present the audience with a fictional world with fictional characters, a world referred to by Briggs (2003) as *Tarantinoland*. Briggs argues that *Tarantinoland* "is not fashioned from real life but from movie life" (p. 219). In other words, *Tarantinoland* is shaped by the many popular themes and conventions of the film industry's past. In addition Tarantino draws on many aspects of society outside

the realm of the film industry. While crime and violence have already been discussed in some detail, Tarantino also draws on popular music as well as language, creating a *Tarantinoland* that bridges the gap between movie life and real life. On the surface, his tendency to play with generic conventions and expectations, along with his homages to popular films from years past, creates a world that resembles a fantasyland much like a cool historic collage of popular film. But a closer look reveals that much more is taking place. Tarantino takes film history and tradition, extracts, arranges and rearranges what he likes, moulds it with realistic and popular aspects of contemporary society, and crafts a film unlike any other.

Like the Coens' films, Tarantino's have been difficult to associate with any particular genre. At first glance his films appear to belong to specific genres or sub-genres but in actuality they may oppose the suggested genre. Tarantino sets up most of his films in a manner comparable to the conventional horror film. The initial objective of his films is to surprise and shock. However, situating Tarantino within the horror genre would negate one fundamental difference between his films and horror. Tarantino deals with the violence of reality rather than pure fantasy. When Tarantino set up a showing of *Reservoir Dogs* at the horror festival in Spain, a venue that Tarantino thought would accept the violence of his film, many walked out during the infamous torture scene. Among them were horror moguls like Wes Craven, director of such films as *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977) and *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), and Rick Baker, horror special effects artist for many films as well as Michael Jackson's infamous *Thriller* (1983) music video.

Tarantino was later able to speak with Baker, who set Tarantino outside the horror genre:

I walked out of your movie, but I want you to take it as a compliment. See, we all deal with fantasy. There's no such thing as werewolves or vampires. You're dealing with real-life violence, and I can't deal with it. (Wild, 1994, p. 132)

Through the use of dark humour or real violence, Tarantino surprises and shocks the audience with content that is arguably much more horrifying than a typical horror film. He then goes even further, providing more shocks by adopting a method referred to by screenwriters as “turning a scene,” a method that relies on “the principle that no scene should ever develop the way the audience expects it to develop” (Briggs, 2003, p. 219). Yet Briggs notes that Tarantino goes even further still as he not only turns each scene but “twists it, spins it, turns it inside out, temporarily restores it, interrupts it with pop-culture dialogue, and then shoots it off into space” (p. 219). This strategy is played out through the entirety of his films. Many scenes in Tarantino's films are interrupted by unexpected shootings, rapes, murders and directional plot changes. As the films progress they take on drastic plot changes and become completely different films. Storylines bleed together and the outcome is highly unpredictable.

Any given genre arouses particular expectations, such as plot arrangement and structural elements. Rather than following these generic conventions, Tarantino prefers to estrange his films from genre by deconstructing these conventions. Briggs (2003) characterizes Tarantino's films as “anti-movies” wherein each film upsets every single expectation one might have about any similar movie one has seen in the past (p. 219). In his examination of *Reservoir Dogs*, Briggs discusses the desire to classify the film as a caper film, a sub-genre similar to a heist film but depicting a greater comedic element.

Typically the plot of a caper film falls into the ‘assemble-the-squad-flick’ pattern where the film begins with the process of assembling a squad sufficient to carry out the proposed heist, as in *Oceans Eleven* (Milestone, 1960; Soderbergh, 2001) or *The Italian Job* (Collinson, 1969; Gray, 2003). As the film progresses the characters grow to know each other while the plot builds toward the final execution of the heist or job. Briggs argues that, although *Reservoir Dogs* may appear to be a caper film, it is more fittingly described as a reversal of the caper film. Rather than situating the heist as the climax and conclusion of *Reservoir Dogs*, it comes at the beginning of the film and in addition is not even shown at all. Rather than developing a plot around a squad of characters that come to know and care for one another, *Reservoir Dogs* does quite the opposite. In *Reservoir Dogs* the plot develops around characters referred to by colour aliases in order to attempt to keep their identities anonymous. The characters not only refrain from using their real names but from sharing any of their past, thus the characters know nothing about one another. When the heist falls apart, the characters all turn on one another resulting in complete chaos. Tarantino has taken the caper film and overturned its generic conventions. In *Reservoir Dogs* he has created what Briggs terms the “disassemble-the-squad-flick” in opposition to the typical assemble-the-squad caper flick (p. 219).

Rafter (2006) has also recognized *Reservoir Dogs* as a film that pokes fun at the cop film tradition. She proposes that Tarantino mocks cop films through his representation of Mr. Orange, the undercover police officer, and Marvin Nash, a low ranking patrol officer (p. 130). While these characters are indeed police officers, Rafter refers to them as only “cop-like” because they are never portrayed as heroic or as figures of authority. On the contrary, Mr. Orange spends the entire length of the film lying on

the warehouse floor in a pool of his own blood completely at the mercy of his criminal accomplices, and officer Nash is bound to a chair and brutally tortured for the sheer enjoyment until he is finally shot without warning. Moreover, the only criminal accomplice who trusts Mr. Orange, Mr. White spends much of the film on the warehouse floor with Mr. Orange in a bloody embrace, an image reminiscent of the cop-buddy sub-genre. However, the two characters do not even know each other and furthermore their relationship is founded on lies. Mr. Orange and Mr. White do not gain a greater appreciation for one another, as is often seen in similar cop film scenes. When Mr. White learns that Mr. Orange is indeed an undercover cop, he shoots him to death while cradled in his arms.

In *Pulp Fiction* Tarantino's lack of reverence for cop heroes also becomes apparent in the sole police officer he depicts within the film, Zed, who is revealed to be a serial homosexual rapist and murderer. In the end none of Tarantino's cop-like characters prevail as heroes. Similarly, Tarantino shows little sympathy for cop heroes, as the cop-like characters that he portrays suffer in lengthy agony, get brutally tortured, and are finally murdered because their fate lies in the hands of their criminal counterparts. The issue of assigning Tarantino's films to specific genres remains. His tendency to amalgamate many traditions into one, making them his own in the process, makes it completely unfeasible to assign his films to any particular genre.

### ***HARD-BOILED DIALOGUE***

Tarantino's dialogue shows off an immense knowledge of popular culture as well as an appreciation for an astute streetwise vernacular. His use of a controversial street language develops an extremely masculine form of speech. On the one hand, Tarantino's

affinity for gritty, hard-nosed dialogue has been criticized by those, like Giroux (1995), who identify his dialogue as highly sexualized and racialized while, on the other hand, others, like Pisters (2003), recognize Tarantino's dialogue as a mechanism that bridges the gap between races, lumping all criminals into one common class.

Giroux describes Tarantino's dialogue as "abusive language" that objectifies and belittles women and African Americans (p. 341). Within Tarantino's films, there is a constant stream of racist and sexist remarks, jokes, and insults that lends credibility to Giroux's interpretation. Women become sexually objectified, referred to by such explicit terms as 'fuck machine' or 'cooz' while the word 'nigger' is also used frequently, even up to fifteen times in *Reservoir Dogs*, a film without a single African American character. In *Reservoir Dogs* the colour pink is even criticized for its sexual connotation when Steve Buscemi's character is issued the alias Mr. Pink:

MR. PINK: Why am I Mr. Pink?

JOE CABOT: Because you're a faggot! All right?

MR. PINK: Mr. Pink sounds like Mr. Pussy. How about if I'm Mr. Purple?

Although Tarantino's use of such violent language may be found offensive, it arguably embodies the experience of a white tough-guy vernacular. And although his dialogue may appear racist, his use of such racist speech carries such a tremendous affect that one could argue he simply includes racist and sexist speech to exploit the power that such terms have been afforded, giving his films a shocking and edgy appeal.

Pisters (2003) argues that Tarantino's violent dialogue is a means to extract race from criminality. She postulates that Tarantino's films illustrate a "class of violence" where race may be irrelevant to criminality (p.102). Tarantino's utilization of a minority

language for predominantly white characters demonstrates that there is no difference between blacks and whites when they collectively form a criminal class. Fashioned through such spectacular discussions of race, gender, and above all popular culture, Tarantino's dialogue needs to be examined as it may assist in expressing the absurdist messages of his films. Regardless of the motivation involved in Tarantino's use of such controversial language, his dialogue is so mesmerizing that it often draws the audience in, diverting attention away from the physical violence that occurs.

Early in *Pulp Fiction*, the hit men, Vincent and Jules, are on their way to retrieve a briefcase that belongs to their boss, Marsellus. Leading up to their entrance into the apartment of the dealers who are withholding Marsellus' briefcase, whose contents are never revealed, Vincent and Jules carry on a conversation about the sexual implications of a foot massage, debating whether or not a foot massage involves a strong level of intimacy or not. Their conversation becomes so involved that it distracts attention from the violence that is about to take place, the murder of three young, defenceless drug dealers. Similar conversations take place throughout Tarantino's films, enabling violence and dark humour to jump out of nowhere. After leaving the young dealers' apartment, Jules and Vincent carry on a conversation about divine intervention. Their discussion is suddenly put on hold when Vincent accidentally shoots Marvin. However, after dealing with the carnage of the accident their conversation resumes as if the extremely violent situation was merely a distraction.

Tarantino's use of popular culture vernacular also effectively bonds his otherwise estranged, out of the ordinary, characters to trendy modern-day society. Throughout his films Tarantino embeds pop culture not only in his dialogue and allusions but his

characters' personas as well. In *Reservoir Dogs* Tarantino introduces the audience to eight male characters all brought together for a major diamond heist. With the exception of Mr. Orange, an undercover police officer who reports to his superior, the only interaction these characters have is with one another. At a glance each of the eight characters represents a classical personality type specific to a heist film. Mr. Pink, the professional, Mr. White, the tough guy, Mr. Blonde, the calm and collected, and Joe Cabot, the boss, to name a few. Given a glimpse into the lives of such eccentric characters the audience may expect to have very little opportunity to identify with these characters, but as tough or as psychopathic as they may be, they exhibit a familiar and comforting taste for pop music, television sitcoms and jokes.

Before the opening credits of *Reservoir Dogs* Tarantino engages the audience in a discussion around the real meaning of Madonna's song "Like a Virgin" (1984). While each is welcome to his own understanding of the song, the opening minutes of *Reservoir Dogs* puts forth a debate emphasizing Mr. Brown's interpretation:

MR. BLONDE: It's about a girl who's very vulnerable. She's been fucked over a few times and she meets a guy who's sensitive.

MR. BROWN: Whoa. Timeout. Tell that bullshit to the tourists. "Like a Virgin" is not about some sensitive girl who meets a nice fella.

The conversation then veers off to discuss Madonna's career at greater length and Mr. Brown soon revisits his explanation of "Like a Virgin" declaring the entire song is a metaphor for "big dicks":

Let me tell you what "Like a Virgin" is about. It's all about this cooze who's a regular fuck machine. I'm talkin' morning, day, night, afternoon dick, dick, dick, dick, dick, dick, dick, dick, dick, dick! Then one day, she meets this John Holmes motherfucker. It's like, "Whoa, baby." He's like Charles Bronson in *The Great Escape*. He's diggin' tunnels. Now she's getting' serious dick action. She's feelin' somethin' she ain't felt since forever: pain, pain. It hurts. It hurts her. It



shouldn't hurt her. Her pussy should be Bubble-Yum by now. But when this cat fucks her, it hurts. It hurts just like it did the first time. You see, the pain is reminding a fuck machine what it was once like to be a virgin. Hence, "Like a Virgin."

The debate over "Like a Virgin" takes us full circle, from the proposition of complete nonsense to a logically articulated explanation of the song's meaning. In only the first scene of *Reservoir Dogs* Tarantino utilizes arguably the world's most renowned female performer effectively to demonstrate that meaning and logic are only interpretations. In contrast to the playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd, Tarantino suggests that language cannot be deconstructed to the extent that it becomes nonsense because in *Tarantinoland* logic is as flexible as a rubber band.

Those aspects of life that draw out raw emotions like crime, violence, racism and sexism are all interlaced within Tarantino's dialogue along with the tough-guy image and representations of popular culture. However, Tarantino's dialogue often trumps those displays that draw out raw emotions, as precedence is often given to conversations with little consequence, like the provocative meaning of Madonna's "Like a Virgin" or *Pulp Fiction's* discussion about the implications the metric system has on the McDonalds' menu in Paris. Tarantino's dialogue not only downplays, but also mocks a serious approach to contemporary society through the disturbing amount of emphasis it puts on ludicrous witty banter over the reality of violence and death.

### **CONCLUDING TARANTINO**

The world constructed by Tarantino represents the elements of violence and crime with graphic realism. Tarantino provides the audience with images of excruciating violence, like brutal torture and prolonged death, and then forces them to witness these

scenes at slowed pace. Accompanying real violence is a playful approach that results in dark humour and *happy despair*. Such a playful approach removes any guilt in enjoying gruesome violence. While some may wish to groan in distaste, Tarantino gives his audience the opportunity to become enthralled in the experience. Tarantino relies on dialogue as a significant tool to convey this experience, as well as to portray a high level of popular machismo, which is fundamental in bringing together his films and constructing a particular vision of reality, a vision that grants little significance and seriousness to human life. However, what may be more important in projecting this vision of reality is what Tarantino purposefully excludes from his films.

Throughout Tarantino's films there is arguably a tendency to omit philosophical and moral content. While his characters are all immersed in a criminal lifestyle, Tarantino neglects to make any judgments, which allows them to escape from both justice and morality. If and when Tarantino's characters meet their unfortunate demise, it is only by chance. Rather than expressing human agency through compassion and benevolence Tarantino's characters only have violence. With a lack of philosophical and moral content, Tarantino exposes contemporary society for what it really is, empty and superficial. Philosophical and moral content is simply not welcomed into Tarantino's films because they have no bearing on the outcome of his films. It is as though Tarantino's characters recognize the absurdity of their situations and accept it. What results in Tarantino's films is a world where there is no causality or certainty in life, only one unfortunate truth. Through the continual downplaying of the most horrid and authentically human tendencies, Tarantino's films communicate the ironic message that all that is certain in life is death. This reality is embedded within his films as death is

always unexpected, rarely justified, often ironic and even comical. Oliver (1963) states that the very act of dying is absurd simply because one does not ask to die (p. 225).

Tarantino pushes the audience into a state of *happy despair* where one can accept the highest affirmation of life, the ability to laugh in the face of death.

### CHAPTER 3

#### DAVID LYNCH

Originally aspiring to become an artist, David Lynch began to make the transition to filmmaker in the late '60s. Lynch was one of the first to receive the independent filmmaker's grant from the American Film Institute for the production of his thirty-minute film *The Grandmother* (1970) (Nochimson, 1997). Lynch's first full-length feature followed much later with *Eraserhead* in 1977, a personal film inspired by his time spent in Philadelphia. Set in an industrial city much like Philadelphia, *Eraserhead* follows protagonist Henry Spencer, an industrial printer on vacation, his girlfriend/newlywed wife and their strangely mutated newborn child. To date Lynch has created some of the most original and controversial films in the United States, as well as the widely acclaimed television series *Twin Peaks* (1990-91), but much like those of the Coen brothers and Quentin Tarantino, Lynch's films have been very difficult to locate within a specific genre.

The refusal of Lynch's films to neatly fall into any given genre has resulted in his films' classification in a wide variety of ways. Some like John Simon (1986) have met Lynch's films with much negativity. He reduces Lynch's films to mere pornography on the basis that he treats such things as voyeurism, sadomasochism, latent homosexuality and fetishism simply as an attempt to shock and sexually arouse the viewer. Conversely, others, such as Bruce Williamson (1986), characterize Lynch's films as cult films regardless of their modest commercial success, due to his tendency to transcend traditional conventions of mainstream cinema. Additionally many others have located

Lynch's films within a variety of genres, situating them within such categories as the postmodern crime film (Rafter, 2006, p. 52), the gothic coming-of-age film, neo-noir and simply the small-town film (Denzin, 1988, p. 461).

Although each of the aforementioned classifications has some justification, the plethora of reviews that classify his films in dissimilar and contradictory ways demonstrates an inherent problem when attempting to pin them down thematically. But focusing more intently on philosophical content, rather than technical or stylistic elements, Lynch's films can be seen as predominantly absurdist representations. Approaching them for their relevance to the subject of absurdity will assist in demonstrating how they encourage an absurdist understanding of contemporary society. Much like Tarantino and the Coen brothers, Lynch is easily recognizable for trademark qualities such as his use of both sound and lighting to elicit an emotional response, his perverse combination of sex and violence and his attribution of multiple identities to single characters. However Lynch's narrative structure may be the most absurdist aspect of his work, as the dream-like state evoked by his films corresponds to both Martin Esslin's and Nicole Rafter's characterization of absurdist drama. Beginning with an examination of Lynch's narrative structure in *Blue Velvet* and *Mulholland Drive*, I will situate Lynch within the tradition of the absurd, thus opening his films to an absurdist analysis.

### ***THE LITERATURE OF DREAM AND FANTASY***

Perhaps more than any other filmmaker, David Lynch explores the limits of reality by presenting a smooth yet urgent flow through multiple realities. These realities portray different ways of telling the same story. Lynch's films all tend to reach a

climactic point where the plot direction changes course and a new narrative is revealed. This interchange in storyline is often recognizable as a transition between that which is real and that which is fantasy or dream. More accurately these competing narratives offer extreme representations of happiness and sorrow. Within Lynch's films, dreams are instrumental to his narrative structure and scene development, as well as to the dialogue, all of which together evoke an intense dream-like state, like that referred to by Rafter. Moreover, Esslin contends that absurdist playwrights rely on the projection of "mythical, allegorical and dreamlike modes of thought" into "psychological realities" (p. 349). Lynch's films initially engage the viewer in a reality similar to a dreamland where things seem too good to be true and the most desired fantasies are potentially possible. However, there comes a turning point when this idyllic representation of reality comes crashing down and harsh reality is exposed. In Lynch's films these two realities are separated by an awakening, which distorts the viewer's perception of the film as it becomes apparent that multiple narratives are at work. What results is not a blurring of the two psychological realities at play but rather a sharp contrast dividing the two.

Lynch's depictions of reality initially present a utopian look at life and the world. Later, he exposes his characters to the harsh reality of society where they encounter life's sordid aspects, such as crime, sexual perversion and the basic violence of nature and all existence. He depicts a world where all is possible, where all happiness, love, life, perversion, violence and death can transpire; but the way in which these realities are separated within the narrative structures of Lynch's films suggests that those frightening and upsetting dreams are not nightmares in the literal sense, but are rather constitutive of the reality his characters live in.

In *Blue Velvet* this change is apparent in the beginning of the film as the protagonist, Jeffrey Beaumont (Kyle MacLachlan), stumbles upon a severed ear that awakens him from the dream of safe, middle-class American life. In *Mulholland Drive* the plot transformation comes much later in the film when the audience becomes aware that the entire film has consisted of memories belonging to Diane Selwyn (Naomi Watts), an aspiring actress who has failed both in Hollywood and in love. While aspects of both psychological realities within Lynch's films make up notions of reality, Lynch's idyllic reality resembles a bright and happy dream and his harsh reality, at the other extreme, resembles the dark and dreary reality of suffering. To better comprehend Lynch's narrative style, it will be beneficial to examine these two extremes within his films separately

### ***The Dream***

*Blue Velvet* commences in the small middle-class American neighbourhood of Lumberton, a community that appears too wonderful to be real. It is a beautiful day, there is barely a cloud in the sky, and flawless red roses sway back and forth ever so gently in a calm breeze in front of a white picket fence. The audience is given the impression of a very close-knit community and taken down a neighborhood street where they encounter friendly firemen and an attentive crossing guard. The camera then turns to a particular home with a picture-perfect yard enclosed within the archetypal white picket fence. The home belongs to Jeffrey Beaumont's father (Jack Harvey) who stands outside watering the lawn while his mother sits drinking tea and watching what appears to be a '50s or '60s television crime drama. Jeffrey too embodies the archetypal young small town American Male. While it is apparent that he is family-oriented as he returns

from college to help run his father's hardware store after the decline of his father's health, he is clearly discontented with the monotony of his daily life. In this opening sequence, Lynch reveals to the audience the idealization of the safe, middle-class American lifestyle. Cut off from the violent margins of society, the residents of Lumberton know the pain and suffering of crime and violence only through the experiences television can offer.

Greatly contributing to the dreamlike state of the introduction of *Blue Velvet* is the accumulation of cultural references spanning a number of eras and decades. The fire truck appears to be from the 1950s, while some of the clothing is more appropriate to the 1980s, and the vehicles and television programs seem to come from the 1960s. Furthermore, each element is accompanied by the sound of Bobby Vinton's 1963 hit from which the film takes its title, which also spans decades, debuting in the 1950s and still being rerecorded in the present by artists such as Barry Manilow (2006).

On the other hand, the narrative structure of Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* is a little more difficult to discern. While there are many readings of *Mulholland Drive*, a popular one suggests that the film begins in a dream belonging to Diane Selwyn. This dreamlike portion of the film is devoted to her desires and fantasies, unlike *Blue Velvet*, which arguably deals with the dreamlike state impinging on the majority of the population of Lumberton. Diane's dream begins with a flashback to her promising childhood, winning an adolescent dance contest. In the dream, as we discover much later in the film, Betty is a previous representation of Diane (also played by Naomi Watts), a young, happy, aspiring version of her current self. The film proceeds in the dream state developed by Diane, but much of the plot has already unraveled unbeknownst to the audience. Diane's



dream concludes with the murder of Camilla (Laura Harring), Diane's friend and lover as well as a successful actress.

Diane's dream and the beginning of the film follow Betty, a young, perky, hopeful actress who arrives in Hollywood. When she arrives at her aunt Ruth's vacated apartment, where she will be staying, she is confronted with Rita (also played by Laura Harring), who outside Diane's dream is recognized as Camilla. Rita, nearly murdered by a limo driver escorting her to an undisclosed destination, escapes when a speeding car collides with the limo while she is held at gunpoint. Suffering from amnesia and knowing she may still be in danger, Rita seeks refuge in Betty's/Diane's aunt's apartment, creeping through the door while the aunt is readying her luggage to leave. When Betty explores her temporary home she stumbles upon discarded clothes on the bedroom floor. Investigating the situation, Betty discovers a frightened woman in the shower. Realizing she has forgotten her name, the frightened woman identifies herself as Rita after a Rita Hayworth poster on the bathroom wall. Agreeing to help Rita discover her true identity, Betty embarks on a mysterious adventure with limited clues, and a small blue key without a lock, that draws the women together intimately, and sexually. Betty experiences all of her desires, friendship, love, sexual gratification, the thrill of solving a mystery and success as an actress in Hollywood. When Betty and Rita both vanish into thin air after opening a peculiar small blue box that corresponds to their blue key, it becomes apparent that Diane has returned to conscious reality and both Rita and Betty are figments of her imagination.

### *Wakening*

Although the introduction to *Blue Velvet* is reminiscent of a feel-good family movie from the '50s, a less pleasant reality is literally right under the surface of the false utopia Lynch temporarily constructs. While Jeffrey's father waters what appears to be a perfectly healthy lawn, the camera gives us a glimpse beneath the lawn's surface and reveals a violent infestation of beetles so thick that they must climb over one another. Because the disturbed mob of beetles is not detached from Jeffrey's utopian society, the image initiates a change in mood. Both the unsettling appearance and the grotesque sound emanating from the beetles interrupt the calming tone set by the opening scene. This interruption, accompanied by what appears to be the heart attack or stroke of Jeffrey's father, signifies that the dream world originally constructed by Lynch is about to collapse.

On his way home from visiting his father at the hospital Jeffrey leaves the streets and takes an unbeaten path through the countryside where he chances across a severed human ear. Jeffrey would not have encountered the severed ear had he stuck to the more accustomed path home, but it is his adventurous attitude and the severed ear that ultimately open him up to the harsh realities of the world. Later in the evening after taking the ear to the police, Jeffrey, unable to rest with the mystery of the ear prodding at him, goes for a walk. The neighbourhood is no longer the utopia originally portrayed. The streets are dark, the people are strange and unfriendly, and the tree leaves eerily rustle in the wind. Lynch then cuts to a close-up of the severed ear, slowly drawing the

audience closer and closer until finally the camera moves inside the ear, where the dream ends and the suffering reality begins.

Similarly, in *Mulholland Drive*, “reality” interrupts the dream that first seems real. After Betty and Rita spontaneously engage in passionate love making, arguably the height of Diane’s dream or fantasy, the two attend Club Silencio where, upon their entrance, Lynch uses the camera in a similar manner to the close up of the ear, quickly closing in on the entrance of the club until it goes inside. Inside the Club a man performs a dramatic routine using a recording of an orchestra to emphasize the use of illusions within the theatre: “There is no band! *Il n’y a pas d’orchestre*. This is all a tape recording. *No hay banda* and yet we hear a band...” The performer’s words seem to dramatically affect both Betty and Rita. Nearing the end of his performance, the meaning of his words becomes clear. The performer recites, “It is an illusion,” and then he triggers a thunder and lightning storm only to disappear from the stage. Betty is then struck with a shaking attack resembling a seizure. The performer’s words are a metaphor for a dream. While a dream may be experienced as real, it is only an illusion, and Betty’s shaking sets her waking in motion. Before leaving Club Silencio Betty locates a small blue box in Rita’s purse that they recognize as a match to Rita’s key. The two return to Betty’s aunt’s apartment to open the mysterious box, but before they can, Betty evaporates from Diane’s dream, leaving Rita alone to open the box. As with the ear in *Blue Velvet*, both the audience and Rita are taken inside the box, where misery awaits, as the small blue box, now holding the dream, falls to the floor.

### *Lynchian Reality*

Once awakened from the dreamlike state in both cases, they become completely different films. *Blue Velvet*, initially a feel good movie of the '50s, now becomes a modern detective mystery; *Mulholland Drive*, once a puzzling mystery, becomes a maniacal thriller. These plot transformations precede most of the criminal, violent and perverse content of Lynch's films, a collection of vile subject matter that Pisters (2003) files under the umbrella term of *shock* (p. 138). Before discussing the harsh realities of Lynch's films it will be beneficial to first understand the effects and implications of his shock tactics.

Although Lynch may often comment on aspects of society, his meaning could easily be lost on many as the aesthetic shock of his graphic realism takes precedence. According to Oliver (1963), absurdist playwrights must bury their ideological messages in comedy and amusing sensational symbols (p. 229). Likewise, Lynch conceals ideological messages through his reliance on aestheticized shock. Pisters (2003) claims that shocking, bizarre and perverse subject matter becomes mere aesthetic and technical effect through Lynch's mastery as an auteur. Lynch's mastering of such subject matter allows his audience to experience immunity to such shocking and often disturbing events. Once this immunity is achieved, shock simply becomes a technical quality or an aesthetic signature of Lynch's prowess as a director. Yet it is those shocking aspects and scenes that often distract the audience from the ideological statements that can be taken from the films. Pisters identifies this process as the "Lynch-effect," an effect that she describes as the "distraction of our gaze, and our investments, away from the referential and the

analytical to fasten them on effects of style and on affective shock” (p. 134). The viewer’s attention is drawn away from the analytical and diverted toward the stylistic, and the intense involvement in the detective work of solving the mystery of Lynch’s films takes precedence over such analytical themes. Like absurdist playwrights, Lynch hides ideological messages pertaining to contemporary society, albeit behind the most sensational and controversial aspects of life, like sex, violence and an unconventional mixture of the two. It is easy to dismiss Lynch’s films as pure shock and difficult to read meaning into these controversial scenes critically, although doing so offers the analytical viewer a glimpse at his auteurist vision.

After the plot transformation in *Blue Velvet* Jeffrey becomes immersed in his own criminal investigation in an attempt to unravel the story of the severed ear. Through his investigations he becomes involved with a local nightclub singer, Dorothy Vallens (Isabella Rossellini) and gang kingpin Frank Booth (Denis Hopper), through both of whom Jeffrey gains insight into sexual perversion and criminality and their effects. Jeffrey’s first encounter with both Dorothy and Frank comes on the night of his stakeout at Dorothy’s apartment. Attempting to follow up on a lead to the case of the missing ear Jeffrey is led to Dorothy, and he breaks into her apartment to search for clues only to be forced to hide in her closet as she unexpectedly comes home. When Dorothy discovers Jeffrey hiding in her closet, she begins threatening him with a kitchen knife eventually forcing him to strip. Jeffrey’s humiliating situation quickly escalates into a violent sexual encounter bordering on rape as Dorothy forces Jeffrey onto the couch kissing him while firmly holding the knife over him. When Frank interrupts them with a knock at the door, Jeffrey is forced back into the closet from which through the shutters he witnesses Frank

physically and sexually abuse Dorothy. When Frank finally leaves, Jeffrey rushes out to console Dorothy, but she convinces him to feel her breast and to his surprise invites him to hit her. Jeffrey later unravels the mystery of a kidnapping, murder and police corruption, all the while becoming intimately involved with both Sandy Williams (Laura Dern), a police detective's daughter, and Dorothy, so that he partakes in both a conventional legitimate relationship and a sexually violent relationship simultaneously.

Unlike in *Blue Velvet*, the plot transformation in *Mulholland Drive* comes near the end of the film. When Diane Selwyn awakes, the audience also becomes conscious of the fact that Diane's most desired fantasies, experienced by her alter ego Betty, are indeed just a dream. In Lynch's suffering reality, Diane is introduced as an emotional wreck. She is not the successful actress Betty was in her dreams, nor is she the desired object of love and affection for a beautiful woman. She is an ill-fated actress, failing to cope with the emotional trauma of losing Camilla, the woman she loves, to film director Adam Kesher (Justin Theroux). Throughout the film's conclusion Lynch bounces the storyline back and forth between the decline of Diane's physical and mental state and flashbacks to her breakup with Camilla. Following her breakup with Camilla, Diane's physical appearance progressively deteriorates to a point where she is no longer recognizable as her former self, Betty. She has become a paranoid and nervous wreck. Before the decline of Diane's mental and physical state, the audience is provided a glimpse beyond her dream where a number of organized criminals, hit-men and prostitutes exist unbeknownst to her alter ego, Betty. Once she is wakened, suffering reality induces Diane to not only acknowledge criminality beyond emotional distress but also to participate in criminal activity by hiring a hit-man to kill her ex-girlfriend Camilla

and ultimately to kill herself because she is unable to cope with both her shameful failure as an actress and the immense guilt of having Camilla murdered.

The harsh realities in Lynch's films are heavily reliant on the shocking effect of graphic sex and violence. However, examining the two topics individually in Lynch's films is unfeasible. What makes these elements so shocking is that they go hand in hand, as violence is sexual and sex is violent. Although the marriage between violence and sex is evident in *Blue Velvet* from the initial sexual encounter between Jeffrey and Dorothy, it becomes overwhelmingly apparent through Frank's strange and extremely violent and sexual behaviour. In his first onscreen encounter with Dorothy, Frank sits opposite Dorothy demanding that she open her robe and "spread her legs." The scene quickly escalates to its sadomasochistic peak as Frank starts screaming profanities and punching an oddly delighted Dorothy in the face as she gasps, "Yes." Frank proceeds to throw Dorothy to the floor, warning her not to look at him while he mounts and rapes her. Before Frank leaves he strikes her one last time nearly knocking her unconscious exclaiming, "Stay alive."

Nearing the climax of Jeffrey's investigation he is taken hostage by Frank and, rather than simply roughing him up, Frank commences to defile Dorothy in front of him. Before severely beating him, Frank applies a thick layer of red lipstick and kisses him repeatedly across his face. Frank goes on to comment on Jeffrey's relationship with Dorothy, and addresses love as violent in nature:

Don't be a good neighbour to her. I'll send you a love letter straight from my heart, fucker! You know what a love letter is? It's a bullet from a fucking gun, fucker! You receive a love letter from me you're fucked forever! You understand fuck? I'll send you straight to hell, fucker!

After lecturing Jeffrey on the concept of love, Frank entices him to feel his muscles then unleashes a physical assault that leaves Jeffrey unconscious.

The shocking nature of these scenes effectively overshadows an apparent critique of American society. In *Blue Velvet* Lynch initially introduces the audience to the utopian community of Lumberton with a picture-perfect neighbourhood and the nuclear family, only to later recreate the nuclear family through his characters' role playing in violent sexual scenes. Dorothy becomes a mother as Jeffrey and Frank share the roles of father and son. In his pursuit of sexual gratification, Frank takes on the role of a child while forcing Dorothy into the role of a maternal figure, calling her "mommy" and speaking in the third person stating, "Baby wants to fuck." Giving Jeffrey guidance on the subject of love, Frank situates himself in a patriarchal position while positing Jeffrey as an adolescent, although he is not fixed in the status of a child as he takes on the role of a mature male through his relationship with Dorothy. American family values are challenged in *Blue Velvet* as the family is reconstructed with perversion, physical and sexual abuse, incest, and homosexuality.

In *Mulholland Drive* the proverbial bullet that is love hits Diane, and the consequences of her affair with Camilla lead to her suicide. Diane's withdrawal from her relationship with Camilla results in hallucinations about Camilla that leave her pleasing herself sexually. But her masturbation quickly turns into punishment as she transitions from satisfying herself to striking herself. While it is possible that Diane's self-loathing derives from allowing herself to lose Camilla, another reading could suggest hatred for her sexuality. Within Lynch's films sex and sexuality appear to exist without limits. Not only are displays of sexual activities unpredictable but also gender roles seem to have



little value since heterosexuality, homosexuality and bisexuality are all interwoven. In Diane's case her hatred may be a reflection of contemporary society's, as well as her own, disapproval of homosexuality. Perhaps she is not striking herself out of self-loathing for losing Camilla but rather she is attacking her very body, as it could not satisfy Camilla.

Through his films Lynch provides society with what it looks down upon the most, such as violence and perversions, but desires the most, such as sex and that which is forbidden, all the while criticizing society for its hypocrisy. Lynch utilizes portrayals of sadomasochism to challenge conventional societal norms, but the challenging statements he brings forth are often lost in the distraction of shock. What is perhaps more shocking than the shock value of Lynch's films is the lack of critical or analytical attention that is granted to the shock. Pisters (2003) postulates that Lynch's shocking technique, which has become his main selling point, has simply receded to "ambient weirdness," which conceals his assessment of social issues pertaining to matters of values and sexuality (p. 157).

### ***PURE THEATRE***

Keeping Esslin's tradition of the absurd in mind, Lynch's dreams are also representative of another category Esslin refers to as 'pure theatre' (1968, p. 318). This assumption suggests that the dreams Lynch depicts provide a level of communication above language. Lynch explains his reliance on dreams as a means to express those emotional experiences that cannot be gained through conventional communication: "It's a subjective thing. It wouldn't strike Bob the way it strikes Sam and the way it strikes Susie. They're all coming from a different place" (Rodley, 1997, p. 15). While Esslin

proposes that absurdist playwrights turn away from language as the instrumental mode for expressing the deepest levels of meaning, a similar approach to language can be found within Lynch's style of filmmaking.

In his examination of *Eraserhead*, Eric Wilson (2007) identifies Lynch as a skeptic with regard to the authority granted to language. He claims that Lynch views language as "mostly an oppressive phenomenon," and consequently much of *Eraserhead* is spent attempting to break through the linguistic surface (p. 29). Lynch's endeavour to do so results in a film that leaves the audience in an "irreducibly ambiguous" or "seemingly meaningless plane" where language is used in such a manner that it erases itself (p. 30).

In an interview with Paul Woods (2000), Lynch comments on the effect that attaching language to objects can have on an experience. When one names something, accompanying the 'name' may be a negative connotation. For this reason Lynch finds beauty in that which is not attached to language: "It's the kind of thing where... if you don't name it, it's beautiful. But as soon as you do, all kinds of associations become attached to it, and people will be turned off" (p. 34). If language and words are then understood to overpower or predetermine experiences, perhaps this is why Lynch's films are predominantly visual and intuitive.

Rather than relying on dialogue, Lynch structures his scenes with visual imagery that divulges greater meaning than words possibly could. Each scene is structured to enact different moods, emotions and understandings. This becomes apparent in *Blue Velvet* through his use of light and darkness. Lynch's scenes, set within the artificial safe landscape of the small town of Lumberton, are illustrated with bright lighting and vibrant

colours while the more violent vision of Lumberton is conversely illustrated with dark lighting and dim gloomy colouring. Lynch also allows his characters the ability to transition back and forth through the shades of light and darkness by affording them varying degrees of ambivalence. Many filmmakers examine the conventional separation of good and evil, but Lynch, on the other hand, deconstructs this separation, allowing his characters to encompass both shades of light and good or darkness and evil simultaneously.

The characters that can be perceived as ‘good’ are not completely innocent. He portrays characters with ambivalence. Eric Wilson (2007) describes this as Lynch’s method of moving back and forth between shades of light and darkness. Is Jeffrey in *Blue Velvet* a detective or a pervert? While he attempts to solve the mystery and help Dorothy he poses as an exterminator, breaks into her apartment and watches her. Beyond his minor deviance, he also is enthralled by new sadomasochistic sexual experiences with her. Sandy on the other hand, the most wholesome of characters, assists Jeffrey, giving him information on the found ear, drawing him closer to the mystery in which he becomes enveloped. In *Mulholland Drive*, Naomi Watts plays both the young bubbly aspiring actress who can do no wrong, as well as the failed actress who, not being able to live with the pain of rejection by her female partner, has her killed. Similar to the imagery presented through lighting or scenery or characters, Lynch often employs stylistic techniques through camera work which are crucial for meaning derived from specific scenes.

In other cases Lynch places significant meaning in specific objects. In *Mulholland Drive* considerable meaning is given to the small blue box that awakens

Diane from her dream. While Betty and Camilla never speak about the box, they gaze upon it in awe as they know it holds the answer to the question of Camilla's true identity. Never attaching a name to the box allows it to remain ambiguous. The contents of the box are never revealed to the audience and its significance is open to speculation. The bizarre blue box exists as Lynch wanted it to, outside the confines of language.

### ***CONCLUDING DAVID LYNCH***

"It's a strange world isn't it?" This quotation from *Blue Velvet* captures the effect Lynch's films. They demonstrate how strange the world can be by deconstructing that which society deems normal. Lynch initially presents the stories of his films in one particular manner only to completely erase them and rebuild them anew in an entirely different light, and in doing so he challenges the conventions of contemporary society. His films exhibit both the most pleasant and the most objectionable aspects of the human experience. Only when Lynch wakes the audience and his characters from the pleasant satisfying dream does he expose life's unfortunate opposite, sorrow.

This unsettling reality displayed within Lynch's films is suggestive of Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, first published in 1942. Camus compares the absurdity of human life to the mythical tragic hero, Sisyphus. He retells the tale of Sisyphus, condemned by the Gods for the rest of eternity to the continuous futile punishment of rolling a large rock to the top of a mountain only to have a moment before the rock returns back to the base of the mountain where he must begin his task again. If Sisyphus can complete his task he can be content and even joyful, but the absurdity of his situation forces him to rediscover his burden at the base of the mountain. In order to go on living

Sisyphus must keep striving for happiness in spite of sorrow. As Camus implies, there is only one world, and absurdity and happiness are two sons of the same earth (1955, p. 2).

Lynch's films illustrate this world by examining both happiness and sorrow separately, through the greatest extremes of dreams and harsh reality, but he ultimately provides an assessment of the effects the absurdity of the human condition has on individuals. It is here that Lynch's approach to absurdity is different from the approach of the Coen brothers and Tarantino. Lynch's films lead up to a moralizing conclusion where the audience is left to reflect on morality. In *Blue Velvet* Jeffrey is originally discontented with his monotonous existence and finds the mystery of the severed ear exhilarating. He knows that there is more to life, something that he is missing, an experience that will allow him to see the world as it really is. Jeffrey understands that he must leave the confines of safe society in order to observe and experience life at its fullest and gain a heightened awareness: "There are opportunities in life for gaining knowledge and experience. Sometimes it's necessary to take a risk." Throughout his adventure Jeffrey experiences the most violent extremes society has to offer him. He witnesses kidnapping, murder, sexual perversion, homosexuality, incest, dope fiends, as well as participating in acts of sadomasochism and suffering a nearly fatal beating.

As *Blue Velvet* concludes, Lynch takes us back to the dream state he originally offered in the introduction of the film. The camera appears to take the audience out of Jeffrey's ear and into the safe middle-class American neighborhood where all remains unchanged. Not a cloud in the sky, the flawless red roses still swaying in the wind, friendly firemen still wave, but Jeffrey is somehow different. With the knowledge and experience of the most grief-stricken aspects of human life, Jeffrey is now conscious of

the absurdity of life and has a heightened appreciation for happiness. However, *Blue Velvet* does little to comment on whether or not people can be happy knowing the absurdity of their condition. The uncertainty of the answer to this question is apparent through Dorothy Vallens' expression throughout the final scene when she finally becomes reunited with her son. Although all has been returned to normal or a supposedly natural state, anguish is still visible in Dorothy's face. Although she is free to embrace her son, her expression leaves the viewer pondering whether the repercussions of the evil she and her son have faced will leave them fearful of pursuing happiness.

*Mulholland Drive* illustrates not the height of evil but the height of sorrow. When the audience witnesses Betty awakened from her sleep, her appearance has changed. While she is still the same person she is no longer bubbly and full of life; she appears depressed and emotionally tortured, living a completely different life, the life of Diane. Delusional, Diane begins to have visions of a woman named Camilla, who appeared as Rita in the earlier narrative, revealing the breakup of their relationship and the emotional turmoil it caused Diane. Camilla's engagement to film director Adam Kesher pushes Diane's sadness to hatred and impels her to have Camilla killed, a decision that fills her with guilt and grief, which, coupled with her failure as an actress, eventually leads through a downward spiral ending with her suicide.

It becomes clear that those elements of Diane's life as Betty that shaped her former happy bubbly self depended on the significance she placed on social and professional status. Placing such immense importance on her relationship with Camilla and success as an actress, Diane was striving for a sense of permanence where she may have needed it the most. However, within an absurd existence no one is capable of

achieving such permanence, there is only permanence in death, a permanence she eventually seeks out. Oliver (1963) argues that “the more we strive for definition and permanent distinction, the more absurd we are” (p. 225). He continues to address the irony of a situation like that which Diane finds herself in:

If we despair of definition, of ever achieving a sense of permanence, and we contemplate suicide, we are put in the absurd situation of sacrificing our only concrete value, life, for a dream of power and permanence that no man on this earth has ever experienced (p. 225).

While Oliver is speaking more broadly of the purpose or meaning of human existence, Lynch’s representation of Diane’s personal battle is emblematic of those who choose to acknowledge their absurd existence and, for Diane, suicide is her only means to exert power over her existence.

Unlike Jeffrey in *Blue Velvet*, whose full experience of human life leaves him with knowledge, wisdom and an appreciation for life, Diane is left with such sorrow that she cannot foresee happiness in her future. If she were as strong as Sisyphus and could push her hatred and grief far enough she may be capable of experiencing happiness again. Instead the absurdity of life debilitates her, and she cannot accept it and commits suicide. Once Lynch’s characters are given a glimpse into how strange the world actually is, they know that the only way they can survive and be happy is by accepting human life as absurd and meaningless. Those who live life in a dreamlike state are freed from the strange and absurd universe. Therefore they can be completely content, unless, of course, they wake up and their fantasy turns into the nightmare that is reality.

## —CONCLUSION—

The previous chapters have demonstrated that the selection of filmmakers and their films can be effectively discussed in the context of the absurd. While it is clear that the films of the Coen brothers, David Lynch, and Quentin Tarantino all deal significantly with crime, criminality and the consequences of criminal behavior, they depict these characteristics through an absurdist philosophy. These directors have been recognized for their ability to master and blur generic conventions, although to date there has been little success in classifying them within any specific tradition. Until recently, there has been no attempt to academically compare these directors. Greg Tuck, a professor from the University of the West of England, has most recently linked these directors together as representing an emerging style within contemporary film in his article “Laughter in the Dark” (2009). As the research portion of this thesis was completed before the publication of Tuck’s article, it has not been mentioned in the earlier chapters; however, Tuck may now be drawn on to assist situating these directors accurately as absurdist filmmakers.

Tuck positions the Coens, Tarantino and Lynch all within the context of neo-noir, a category of film which he struggles to define in his opening paragraph, delineating neo-noir not by defining what it is but rather by what it is not, stating that noir “isn’t bright, it isn’t lucky and it isn’t happy. But is it funny” (p. 152). While I would agree with Tuck’s linking these directors together based on their shared affinity for dark comedy and irony, I would disagree with his classification scheme because he attests that such comedic events in neo-noir are typically “unsentimental” (p. 159). This argument rests on the notion that the violence within the films of the Coens, Tarantino and Lynch is merely



“senseless.” As Tuck states, violence simply “has no purchase on us outside the parameters of the narrative” (p.164). However, I would contest that the comedic violence in these films grips us in such a way that we are forced into the awkward situation of acknowledging absurdity. Furthermore, Tuck argues that the act of laughing at dark situations distances us from the characters and their plots, but the films explored here go through great lengths to connect us to their characters. It is not as though we laugh at the violence and crime faced by these characters simply because we do not identify with them, as Tuck describes, rather we laugh because we recognize their predicaments as our own. The ironic nature of these films mirrors our contemporary society, and they consequently urge us to laugh because we can see how absurd our existence really is.

While Tuck’s efforts can be commended, his categorization forces him to the realization that neo-noir cannot adequately accommodate all three filmmakers. His examination demonstrates a contrast on the topic of violence. Tarantino’s films are set apart for their lack of morality. Tuck states: “there is no ‘other’ world that escapes the corruption and violence; the darkness is totalized” (p. 165). Tuck is suggesting that there are two worlds portrayed throughout the films examined. One world, like that of Tarantino’s films, shows violence with no moral understanding of its consequences. This world is portrayed in the films of David Lynch through such segments as the later half of *Mulholland Dr.* with the plot of Diane Selwyn or the portion of *Blue Velvet* once inside the severed ear and also in the Coens’ films where ultraviolence exists unbeknownst to some of their characters, like Abby in *Blood Simple*. The other world, which arguably does not exist in Tarantino’s films, is sheltered from violence and darkness, where characters share a moral understanding of crime and the consequences of crime but do

not experience them. This world is epitomized by Lynch's portrayal of the utopian town of Lumberton in *Blue Velvet*.

For Tuck's purpose this is a sharp contrast. His explanation is based primarily on the visual aesthetic of the films and the comedy that results from the removal of emotion from violent situations. For the purpose of this thesis these two worlds represent a stylistic difference in portraying the absurd. Tarantino may be recognized as displaying the height of absurdity through a world of totalized darkness. The Coen brothers and Lynch demonstrate the predicament of living with the absurdity: while the morally sound world exists it is always undercut by a world of totalized darkness.

Categorizing these films as neo-noirs or dark neglects the fact that they often portray a bright and happy feel, especially the films of Tarantino. These films can be better defined as absurdist crime films because they reject tragedy, perhaps the greatest component of the "dark." The solution is to look beyond the comedy of these films, be it dark or otherwise, and understand the ramifications of our laughter and the philosophical implications. There is no question that laughing at death and violence is absurd, but we are able to laugh at it simply because it is absurd. These films portray a world that is not dark, but quite bright because absurdity is accepted as part of the human existence. The collection of films examined can be best characterized as a type of film that uses crime and criminal behavior in such a manner to demonstrate the absurd. Although the plots of the examined films differ considerably, they all demonstrate the meaninglessness of the human condition. In this demonstration the use of dark humour becomes instrumental in delivering the absurdist philosophy. Whether it arises through extreme irony, complete

surprise, or simply strange occurrences, dark humour places the audience in the position to acknowledge the absurd.

In the absurdist crime film laughter becomes key. Throughout absurdist crime films we are frequently prompted to laugh at crime, violence and many other serious moral dilemmas. The act of laughing obligates us to reflect upon the very absurdity of our actions. Laughing at the most negative and horrendous aspects of life may be the greatest affirmation of life we can ever achieve, accomplishing the notion of *happy despair* referred to earlier. It is this absurd predicament that suggests the meaninglessness of the human condition, and conversely the meaninglessness of the human condition frees us to laugh.

Traditional crime films time and again demonstrate that there are aspects of life that society deems unethical, and these aspects are condemned within the framework of widely accepted moral codes. However, within absurdist crime films all those aspects governed under morality are met with great laughter. Absurdist crime films invite us to laugh at discussions of divine intervention (*Pulp Fiction*), at murder and death (*Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Blood Simple*, *Fargo* and *Mulholland Drive*), at vivid displays of torture (*Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction* and *Blue Velvet*), and even at explicit depictions of sexual abuse and rape (*Pulp Fiction* and *Blue Velvet*). These opportunities for laughter incite us to question the morals and values that apparently reign supreme within contemporary society. Yet, while absurdist crime films may appear to suggest a reorganization of traditional value systems, the point is to acknowledge the unreasonable nature of all such systems.

While the Coens, Tarantino and Lynch all concentrate on aspects related to absurdity like extreme irony, dark humour, crime and violence, the degree to which these directors rely on these characteristics is quite different. For the Coen Brothers, much of their emphasis in displaying the absurd emerges from their plot construction and the extreme irony in their plots. Dark humour grows from the irony faced by the Coens' characters, and the audience is given little plot resolution or a specific message. For Tarantino the primary focus is shocking graphic violence and extreme dark humour, which is primarily visual. In Tarantino's films the spectacle grows out of anarchic plot construction, with chaotic and playful representations of violence drenched in humour and without philosophical meaning or moral judgments. Lynch, on the other hand, relies on absurd and shocking representations of crime and violence throughout the length of his films, which lead up to a conclusion that urges the audience to derive their own meaning or commentary on absurdity. These directors suggest that there is no single strategy to creating an absurdist crime film, and the methods used to portray the absurd will no doubt continue to evolve with the sub-genre.

The emergence of this new sub-genre does not suggest that absurdity is a new phenomenon but rather that contemporary society has become more receptive to the absurdist philosophy. We are living in a time when violence and crime can hardly bring us to tears. To the contrary, our anticipated reaction to the aforementioned is cheers. What has resulted in the film industry is the materialization of a new sub-genre of the crime film, one that ironically debunks all preconceived notions of the crime film genre. The absurdist crime film deconstructs contemporary understandings of the genre, demonstrating the meaninglessness of the human condition not through crime and its

consequences but rather through crime and its lack of real consequences. The consequence of murder is not jail time, guilt or grief but having to clean up the mess and deal with the remains. While crime and criminal behaviour still indeed trigger side effects within absurdist crime films, those effects are always deprived of meaning. Although absurdist crime films have only recently been conceptualized as “dryly humorous pictures evoking a dream state,” those dreamlike states can be more adequately identified as an imitation of contemporary reality (Rafter, 2006, p. 52). Absurdist crime films depict characters who are subjected to an absurd existence, their actions are incomprehensible and completely inhumane, but what is most frightening is how effortlessly one can identify with these characters and their situations. The films of the Coens, Tarantino, and Lynch all demonstrate the meaninglessness of human existence, but perhaps the more important question is how we can continue existing without meaning in our very existence.

As the Coens, Tarantino, and Lynch all continue to make films that fit into this relatively unexplored category, they have developed a following for more than twenty-five years, and the films of the directors discussed have grown in number and success. Revisiting these directors’ newer works would provide an avenue to explore the sub-genre over time and track any changes to the overall portrayal of the absurdist message: has it become stronger, more blatant or less emphatic? And while the absurd remains a focal point for these directors, with perhaps the exception of David Lynch who has been working on a number of video shorts, there are few other filmmakers who have adopted an absurdist philosophy, even though the Coens’ *Burn After Reading* (2008) and Tarantino’s *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) arguably display a peak level of absurdity.

Although the high level of independent control that these filmmakers maintain over their projects must be linked to their ability to create films portraying the absurd, and they are arguably the most influential filmmakers of their generation, it is bewildering that few others, if any, are following the path of the absurd. Since films and society share a dialectical relationship, new and emerging genres of film offer a rich opportunity to examine and reflect upon societal thought. The advent of the absurdist crime film sub-genre is an attestation to the growing relevance of the absurdist philosophy within contemporary society.

— FILMOGRAPHY —

*Barton Fink* (Joel & Ethan Coen, 1991)

*Big Lebowski, The* (Joel & Ethan Coen, 1998)

*Blood Simple* (Joel & Ethan Coen, 1983).

*Blue Steel* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1989)

*Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986)

*Burn After Reading* (Joel & Ethan Coen, 2008)

*Death Proof* (Quentin Tarantino, 2007)

*Die Hard* (John McTiernan, 1988)

*Die Hard 2* (Renny Harlin, 1990)

*Die Hard: With a Vengeance* (John McTiernan, 1995)

*Eraserhead* (David Lynch, 1977)

*Fargo* (Joel & Ethan Coen, 1996)

*Grandmother, The* (David Lynch, 1970)

*Hills Have Eyes, The* (Wes Craven, 1977)

*Inglourious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino, 2009)

*Italian Job, The* (Peter Collinson, 1969; F. Gary Gary, 2003)

*Jackie Brown* (Quentin Tarantino, 1998)

*Live Free or Die Hard* (Len Wiseman, 2007)

*Mean Streets* (Martin Scorsese, 1973)

*Michael Jackson's Thriller* (John Landis, 1983)

*Miller's Crossing* (Joel & Ethan Coen, 1990)

*Mulholland Dr.* (David Lynch, 2001)

*Murder by Numbers* (Barbet Schroeder, 2002)

*Mystic River* (Clint Eastwood, 2003)

*Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994)

*Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984)

*No Country For Old Men* (Joel & Ethan Coen, 2007)

*Oceans Eleven* (Lewis Milestone, 1960; Steven Soderbergh, 2001)

*Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994)

*Raising Arizona* (Joel & Ethan Coen, 1987)

*Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954)

*Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino, 1992)

*Shadow of a Doubt* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1943)

*Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991)

*Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976)

*Taking Lives* (D.J. Caruso, 2004)

*True Romance* (Tony Scott, 1994)

*Twin Peaks* (David Lynch, 1990-91)

*Wild at Heart* (David Lynch, 1990)



— BIBLIOGRAPHY —

- Allen, M., & Lincoln, A.E. (2004). Critical discourse and the cultural consecration of American films. *Social Forces*, 82(3), 871-894.
- Berry, R. (1957). *Louie Louie [Recorded by Richard Berry]: Vinyl single*, Flip Records.
- Balogun, F.O. (1984). Characteristics of absurdist African literature: Taban Lo Liyong's fixions A study in the absurd. *African Studies Review*, 27(1), 41-55.
- Brater, E., & Cohn, R. (1990). *Around the absurd: Essays on modern and postmodern drama*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press.
- Briggs, J. (2003). *Profoundly disturbing: Shocking movies that changed history*. New York: Universe Publishing.
- Brown, R. & Sharrett, C. (2008). No country for old men: Pro and con reviews of Hollywood's 'best picture of the year'. *Cineaste* 33(3), 8-13.
- Camus, A. (1942). *The myth of Sisyphus*. Translation by Justin O'Brien, New York: Random House, 1955.
- Carlson, M. (1984). *Theories of the theatre: A historical and critical survey from the Greeks to the present*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Charney, M. (1978). *Comedy high and low: An introduction to the experience of comedy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Clarens, C. (1980). *Crime Movies*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Cohn, R. (1969). *Currents in contemporary drama*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Colebrook, C. (2004). *Irony: The new critical idiom*. London: Routledge.
- Conceison, C. (2004). *Significant other: Staging the American in China*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Denzin, N. K. (1988). *Blue Velvet*: Postmodern contradictions. *Theory Culture Society* 5, 461-473.
- Dozier, L., Holland, B. & Holland, E. (1965). *It's the same old song [Recorded by the Four Tops] Four Top's second album*, Motown.

- Egan, J. & Rafferty, G. (1972). *Stuck in the middle with you [Recorded by Stealers Wheel] Stealers wheel*, A & M Records.
- Esslin, M. (1961, 1968). *The theatre of the absurd*. London: Cox and Wyman.
- Fuller, G. (1998). Answer first, question later. In Peary, G. (Ed.), *Quentin Tarantino Interviews*, (49-65). Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Gehring, W.D. (1988). *Handbook of American film genres*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Gilgen, R.G. (1980). Virgilio Pinera and the short story of the absurd. *Hispania* 6(2), 348-355.
- Giroux, H. (1995). Racism and the aesthetic of hyper-real violence: *Pulp Fiction* and other visual tragedies. *Social Identities*, 1(2), 333-355.
- Grossvogel, D.I. (1962). *The Blasphemers*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Haggard, M. & Holloway, D. (1981). *Big City [Recorded by Merle Haggard]: Big City*, Epic Records.
- Hibbs, T. (2009). The human comedy perpetuates itself. In Conrad, M. (Ed.), *The Philosophy of the Coen brothers* (27-40). Lexington: University of Kentucky Press.
- Jameson, F. (1984). Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism. *New Left Review*; 146, 53-93.
- . (1991). *Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press
- . (1998). *The Cultural turn: Selected writings on the postmodern, 1983-1988*. New York: Verso Books.
- Langman, L., & Finn, D. (1995). *A guide to American crime films of the forties and fifties*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood.
- Leitch, T. (2002). *Crime films*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Levine, J. (2000). *The Coen brothers: The story of two American filmmakers*. Toronto: ECW Press.
- Lippit, J. (1992). Nietzsche, Zarathustra and the status of laughter. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 32(1), 39-49.
- Madonna. (1984). *Like a virgin [Recorded by Madonna]: Like a Virgin*, Sire Records.

- McAlevery, P. (1992). All's well that ends gruesomely. *The New York Times Magazine*, Dec 6, 55,80-82.
- Neale, S. (1976). New Hollywood cinema. *Screen* 17(2), 117-122.
- . (2002). *Genre and contemporary Hollywood*. London: British Film Institute.
- Neale, S. & Smith, M. (Ed.) (1976). *Contemporary Hollywood cinema*. New York: Routledge
- Oliver, W.I. (1963). Between absurdity and the playwright. *Educational Theatre Journal*, 15(3), 224-235.
- . (1965). After absurdity. *Educational Theatre Journal*, 17(3), 196-205.
- Orbison, R. (1963). *In Dreams [Redcorded by Roy Orbison]* In *Dreams*, Monument Records.
- Palmer, R. B. (2004). *Joel and Ethan Coen*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Pisters, P. (2003). *The matrix of visual culture: Working with Deleuze in Film Theory*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Rafter, N. (2000). *Shots in the mirror: Crime film and society*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . (2006). *Shots in the mirror: Crime film and Society* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rodley, C. (1997). *Lynch on Lynch*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Sartre, J.P. (1956). *Being and Nothingness: An essay on phenomenological ontology*. Translation by Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Philosophical Library Inc.
- Schatz, T. (1993). In Collins, J., Radner, H. & Collins, A. (ed.) *Film theory goes to the movies* (8-36). London: Routledge.
- Simon, J. (1986). Neat trick. *National Review*, 38(7 Nov.), 54-56.
- Staiger, J. (1992). *Interpreting films: Studies in the historical reception of American cinema*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Tasker, Y. (1996). *Fifty contemporary filmmakers*. London: Routledge.

- Tuck, G. (2009). Laughter in the Dark: Irony, Black Comedy and Noir in the Films of David Lynch, the Coen Brothers and Quentin Tarantino. In M. Bould, K. Glitre & Tuck (ed). *Neo-noir*. Great Britain: Wallflower Press, 152-67.
- Warshow, R. (1948). The gangster as tragic hero. *Partisan Review*, 15(2), 240-244.
- Wayne, B. & Morris, L. (1963). *Blue velvet [Recorded by Bobby Vinton]: Blue on blue*, Epic Records.
- . (2006). *Blue velvet [Recorded by Barry Manilow]: The greatest songs of the sixties*, Arista Records.
- Williamson, B. (1986). Review of *Blue Velvet*. *Playboy* 37(dec.). 25.
- Wild, D. (1998). Quentin Tarantino, violence and twisted wit. In Peary, G. (Ed.), *Quentin Tarantino interviews*. University Press of Mississippi, 124-135.
- Wilson, E. (2007). *The Strange world of David Lynch: Ironic Religion from Eraserhead to Mulholland Drive*. London: Continuum.
- Woods, P. A. (2000). *Weirdsville, USA: The obsessive universe of David Lynch*. London: Plexus.
- Zarhy-Levo, Y. (2001). *The theatrical critics as cultural agent: Constructing Pinter, Orton and Stoppard as absurdist playwrights*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Zizek, S. (2000). *The art of the ridiculous sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway*. Washington: University of Washington Press.